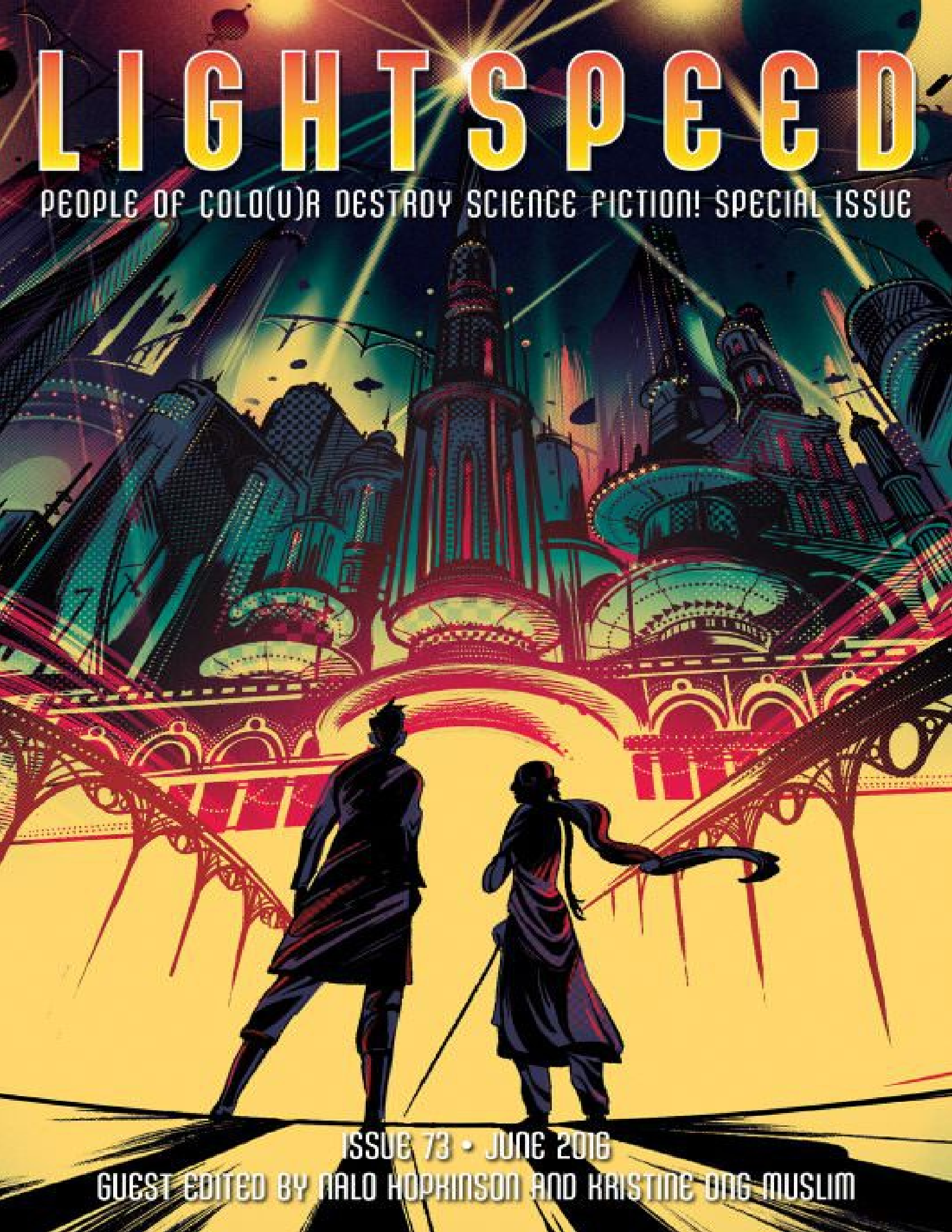
LIGHTSPEED

PEOPLE OF COLO(U)R DESTROY SCIENCE FICTION! SPECIAL ISSUE

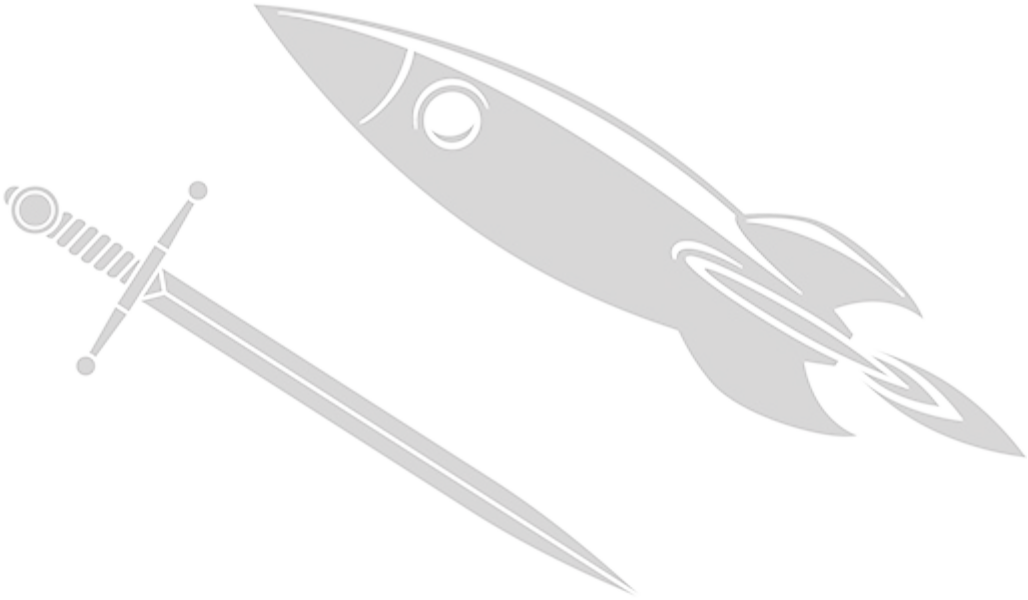


ISSUE 73 • JUNE 2016

GUEST EDITED BY NALO HOPKINSON AND KRISTINE ONG MUSLIM

LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



LIGHTSPEED
SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

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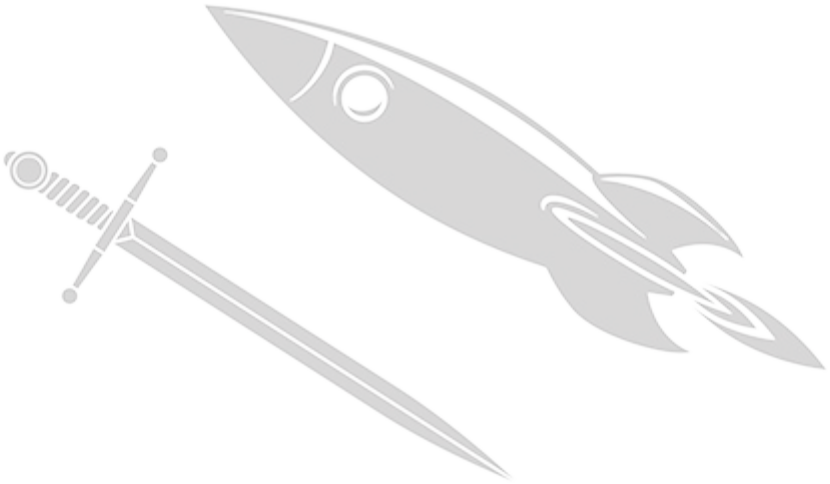
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Cover Art by Christopher Park
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FROM THE EDITORS



The People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction! Manifesto

Special Issue Editorial Staff | 1,400 words

Nalo Hopkinson, Guest Co-Editor in Chief and Editor of Original Short Fiction

It was wonderful to be invited to take part in *Lightspeed's* irreverent "Destroy" project. This is important work. It was a delight to collaborate with Kristine Ong Muslim in choosing the longer fiction. Whether we agreed or disagreed about a story, we were able to talk it through to a decision both amicably and honestly. When I flagged on reading all the submissions that made it through the slush pile, she rallied (and, I hope, vice versa). It felt like a true working partnership, and I can't thank her enough. I loved being secure in the knowledge that the other aspects of the issue (slush, flash fiction, essays, non-fiction, reprints, art, general detail wrangling) were in capable hands. I loved seeing so many submissions (342!) from so many different parts of the world. The illustrations created by the talented artists who read the stories and interpreted them visually makes this special issue gorgeous in another medium. The next time some ignorant soul tries to tell you that people of colour don't read, watch, or write science fiction, here's yet one more forward-thinking venue to which you can point. The next time someone tells you that putting together a collection of SF/F by people of colour will disadvantage the quality of the writing in that collection, let them know that there's no problem finding strong, thoughtful, engaging SF/F and discussion of the genre by people of colour. For the editors of POC Destroy SF, the real dilemma was narrowing our choices down to the few we could fit in the volume. And that's only writing in English! To every writer of colour who submitted work to us, whether or not your piece saw print, you are proving that we belong in this genre. I don't think our presence breaks science fiction at all; I think it expands it.

Kristine Ong Muslim, Guest Co-Editor in Chief and Editor of Original Short Fiction

It was an honor to work with Nalo Hopkinson in choosing the stories to be included in yet another installment to the hugely successful Destroy series of *Lightspeed Magazine*. Submissions were sent in by writers from many parts of the world. This resulted in a final lineup that sported unique voices and diverse perspectives. There is also a good mix of emerging and established POC creatives in this special issue. This volume, which makes for a fine addition to your bookshelf whether it is of the digital variety or otherwise, says a lot about how the making of literature is and should be a collective undertaking. Ideally, it is a long narrative that takes in every shtick and swagger. I think of science fiction as a viewing surface onto which writers project their anxieties and hopes for the future. These anxieties, these hopes are usually told in the language of the present—our time, a point that is now more expansive and nuanced compared to the very-white-and-very-male, white-male-saves-the-world science fiction that served as well-loved comfort food of my youth. People of Colo(u)r Destroy Science Fiction! represents a progressive step in the

history of the genre. The fact that it is also fun—thought-provoking *fun*—to read is just a bonus.

Nisi Shawl, Reprint Fiction Editor

Time is different for us People of Colo(u)r. If you're of an age and ethnicity with me, you grew up hearing how so-and-so was operating on "CPT," or "Colored People's Time." The adjustment called for, as I understood it, was about thirty minutes. So if you wanted Aunt Lurena to show up at the picnic at noon you told her it started at 11:30.

I learned as an adult that the concept of a slightly-out-of-sync chronology could be applied to other groups and situations, too. There was "Island Time," "Counterculture Time," and so forth.

However, there are other ways, besides this delay, in which time's flow varies for POC: It vanishes underground. It reverses. It curves around itself, joining future and past at invisible seams.

Not ours exclusively, this nonstandard temporality, but ours peculiarly.

My selections reflect that connection. Though the events of "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" are told in chronological order, their narrator attempts suicide when she's forced to look into "a kind of temporal mirror." "Double Time" and "Delhi" deal quite explicitly with time travel, and "1965" evokes a hopeful past tinging the heroine's interpretation of an ambiguous present and future. The ending of "Empire Star" winds itself back into its own beginning.

Five reprints. I could have picked fifty: People of Colo(u)r have been destroying science fiction for centuries. At any given point in centuries to come they will have been doing so. The destruction continues here and now.

Grace L. Dillon, Nonfiction Editor

A few years ago I collected and edited an anthology of Indigenous SF entitled *Walking the Clouds* (University of Arizona Press, 2012). I'd long been developing the term "Indigenous Futurisms" to discuss an ironic anachronism in literary influence: Many experimental narrative techniques that cutting-edge SF authors congratulate themselves for discovering have actually been around for millennia in Indigenous storytelling. Slipstreams, alternative realities, multiverses, time traveling—the stock tropes of mainstream SF are ancient elements of Indigenous ways of knowing. In *Walking the Clouds,* I asked emerging Indigenous POC writers to destroy science fiction by using Indigenous epistemologies to reimagine it.

Most Native writers get shelved next to othered Native writers of so-called Native Literature, a convenient but probably not coherent approach to genre, depending on who talks to you. But contemporary Native Literature is loaded with Indigenous Futurisms by writers and artists including Thomas King (Cherokee), Daniel H. Wilson (Cherokee),

Zainab Amadahy (Cherokee/Afro-Canadian), Gerry Williams (Shuswap Nation), Misha Nogha (Métis), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), Amblin Kwaymullina (Palyku People), Brian K. Hudson (Cherokee), Richard Van Camp (Dogrib/Tlicho Nation), Nisi Shawl, Andrea Hairston, Drew Hayden Taylor (Curve Lake First Nations Ojibway), Elizabeth Aileen LaPensée (Anishinaabe/Métis), Stephen Graham Jones (Pigean Blackfeet), and Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe), to name only several.

I am delighted to invite *Lightspeed* readers to visit us in across the internet at The Imagining Indigenous Futurisms Facebook page, a growing discussion forum where more than 1000 members will get you up to speed on all things IF. And if you are one of those emerging writers that I imagined reaching out to when I first sat down to write *Walking the Clouds,* I want you to know about our Imagining Indigenous Futurisms SF Contest, an annual award now in its 7th year. The deadline for submitting your IF SF story: November 1.

Enjoy the nonfiction, and remember to Imagine Indigenous Futurisms. . .

Mino Bimaatisiiwin!

Sunil Patel, Personal Essays Editor

I have no mouth, and I must scream, proclaims the title of Harlan Ellison's classic work of science fiction. Like most "classic" works of science fiction, it was written by a white man. For centuries, white voices have been boosted, have been heard more than those of POC (a muddled term, to be sure, but one that facilitates a necessary discussion). It's been their mouths doing the screaming.

As Personal Essays Editor, I sought to boost a variety of non-white voices. Some established, some still finding their place in the SFF community. Some from the United States, some from around the world. Some with parents of the same race, some biracial. These science fiction fans told stories of their relationship to science fiction—reading, writing, watching, experiencing. And it startled me that even though I had chosen people from so many different backgrounds, they had so many similar feelings. Much of which I felt myself. I read these essays and they brought me to tears. And also to cheers. I arranged these brilliant pieces by POC such that they spoke to each other, sometimes agreeing, sometimes disagreeing; there was no One True POC Experience of Science Fiction but all of these reactions began to paint a picture of what it's like for us. They were our fury. They were our patience.

They were our conversation.

I deliberately started with Alyssa Wong's incendiary "Buzzword" because it captures the don't-tell-me-what-I-can't-do spirit that birthed the Destroy series, but I ended with Caroline M. Yoachim's lovely "Penguins, Robins, and Science Fiction" because it captures the hopeful optimism I wish for the future of the genre. We have mouths, and oh yes, we will scream.

But we will also sing.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Nalo Hopkinson is a Jamaican-born Canadian whose taproots extend to Trinidad and Guyana. She has published numerous novels and short stories, and has edited and co-edited anthologies, including *Whispers From the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction,* and*Mojo: Conjure Stories.* Her writing has received the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the Locus Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic, and the Andre Norton Award. Hopkinson is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. She has taught at both the Clarion Writers' Workshop and the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. Hopkinson's short story collection *Falling in Love With Hominids* was published in 2015 by Tachyon Books. Learn more at nalohopkinson.com.

Kristine Ong Muslim is the author of *We Bury the Landscape* (Queen's Ferry Press, 2012), *Grim Series* (Popcorn Press, 2012), and *A Roomful of Machines* (ELJ Publications, 2015). Her forthcoming books include the short story collection *Age of Blight* (Unnamed Press, 2016) and two poetry collections from university presses in the Philippines. Her stories appeared in *One Buck Horror, Confrontation Magazine, The State,* and elsewhere. She lives in southern Philippines and serves as poetry editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction,* a literary journal published by Epigram Books in Singapore. Learn more at kristinemuslim.weebly.com.

Nisi Shawl is a founder of the Carl Brandon Society and a member of Clarion West's Board of Directors. Since its 2011 inception she has edited reviews for feminist literary quarterly *The Cascadia Subduction Zone*. Books Shawl has edited include *Bloodchildren: Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars;* and *WisCon Chronicles 5: Writing and Racial Identity;* she also co-edited *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices,* and *Octavia E. Butler;* and *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany.* With Cynthia Ward she coauthored 2005 Tiptree Longlist book *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Her story collection *Filter House* co-won the 2009 Tiptree Award. Shawl's Belgian Congo steampunk novel *Everfair* is due out from Tor in September 2016.

Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) is a Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program, School of Gender, Race, and Nations, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, Indigenous Futurisms, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (Oregon State University Press, 2003). Her work appears in diverse journals including *The Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television; Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction; Extrapolation; The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts; The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television; Science Fiction Studies; Parabola;* and *Renaissance Papers.*

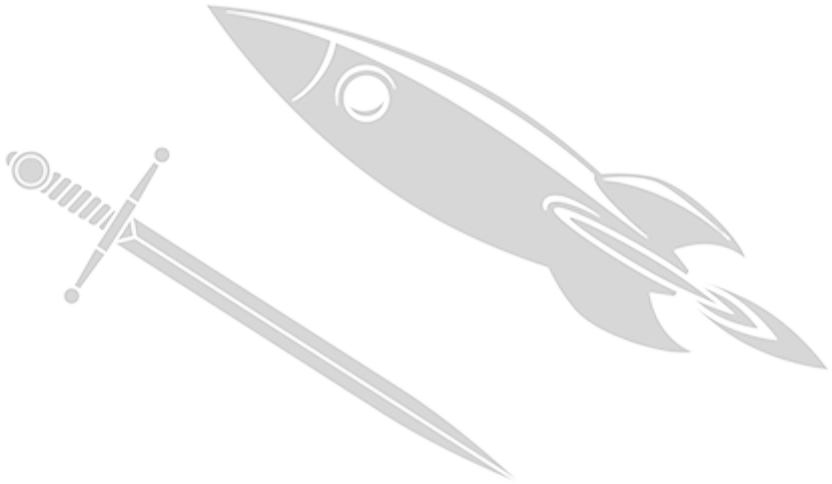
Berit Ellingsen's novel *Not Dark Yet* was published by Two Dollar Radio in November 2015. Berit is the author of the short story collection *Beneath the Liquid Skin* (firthFORTH Books) and the novel *Une Ville Vide* (PublieMonde), with work in W.W. Norton's *Flash Fiction International, SmokeLong Quarterly, Unstuck, The Humanity of Monsters,* and other places. Berit's stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and the British Science Fiction Association Award. The author divides time between Norway and Svalbard in the Arctic, and is a member of the Norwegian Authors' Union. Learn more at beritellingsen.com.

Sunil Patel is a Bay Area fiction writer and playwright who has written about everything from ghostly cows to talking beer. His plays have been performed at San Francisco Theater Pub and San Francisco Olympians Festival, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fireside Magazine, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Flash Fiction Online, The Book Smugglers, Fantastic Stories of the Imagination,* and *Asimov's Science Fiction,* among others. Plus he reviews books for *Lightspeed* and is Assistant Editor of *Mothership Zeta.* His favorite things to consume include nachos, milkshakes, and narrative. Find out more at ghostwritingcow.com, where you can watch his plays, or follow him @ghostwritingcow. His Twitter has been described as "engaging," "exclamatory," and "crispy, crunchy, peanut buttery."

ORIGINAL SHORT FICTION

EDITED BY

NALO HOPKINSON and KRISTINE ONG MUSLIM



A Good Home

Karin Lowachee | 6,800 words



I brought him home from the VA shelter and sat him in front of the window because the doctors said he liked that. The shelter had set him in safe mode for transport until I could voice activate him again, and recalibrate, but safe mode still allowed for base functions like walking, observation, and primary speech. He seemed to like the window because he blinked once. Their kind didn't blink ordinarily, and they never wept, so I always wondered where the sadness went. If you couldn't cry then it all turned inward.

The VA staff said he didn't talk and that was from the war. His model didn't allow for complete resetting or non-consensual dismantling; he was only five years old, so fell under the Autonomy legislation. The head engineer at the VA said the diagnostics didn't show any physical impairment, so his silence was self-imposed. The android psychologist worked with him for six months and deemed him non-violent and in need of a good home.

So here he was, at my home.

• • • •

My mother thought the adoption was crazy. We spoke over comm. I was in my kitchen,

she in her home office where she sold data bolts to underdeveloped countries. "You don't know where they've been, Tawn," she said. "And he's a war model? Don't they get flashbacks, go berserk, and kill you in your sleep?"

"You watch too much double-vee."

"He must be in the shelter for a reason. If the government doesn't want him and he's not fit for industry, why would you want to take him on?"

I knew this would be futile, arguing against prejudice, but I said it anyway. "The VA needs people to adopt them or they have nowhere to go. We made them, they're sentient, we have to be responsible for them. Just because he can't fight anymore doesn't mean he's not worth something. Besides, it's not like I just sign a contract and they hand him over. The doctors and engineers and everybody have to agree that I'd be a good owner. I went through dozens of interviews and so did he."

"Didn't you say he doesn't talk? How did they interview him? How can you be sure he's not violent?"

"They downloaded his experience files. They observed him, and I trust them. The VA takes care of these models."

"Then let them take care of him."

She knew less about the war than she did about me, her son, except that the war got in the way of her sales sometimes. Just like I'd gotten in the way of her potential as a lifestyle designer, and instead of living some perceived, deserved celebrity, she'd had to raise me. Sometimes I wondered if I harbored that thought more than she did, but then she kicked my rivets on things like this and not even the distance of a comm could hide her general disapproval at my existence.

Still, she was worried about the android killing me in my sleep. That might've been sincere. "The VA's overcrowded. That's why they allow for adoptions."

Because she was losing the reasonable argument, she targeted something else. The fallback: my self-esteem. "Why would they think you're a good owner? You can't even afford to get your spine fixed. How are you going to support a traumatized war model?"

That was how she saw me—in need of fixing. "He can help me. I can help him."

Even through a double-vee relay I felt her pity. And I saw it in her eyes. That seemed to be the only way she knew how to care about me.

I wasn't going to do that to him.

• • • •

"Mark." Saying his name in my voice brought him out of safe mode. He blinked but didn't turn away from the window. He didn't move. They'd said it would take a while. Maybe a long while. He'd been at An Loöc, Rally 9, and Pir Hul. The three deepest points of the war. Five years old but he'd seen the worst action. I wondered why none of the creators had anticipated trauma in them. So maybe they weren't as fully developed as humans could be; they were built to task. But they were also built with intelligence and

some capacity for emotional judgment because purely analytical and efficient judgment had made the first models into sociopaths. All of those had been put down (that they'd caught, anyway).

"Mark," I said, "my name's Tawn Altamirano." He knew that, they put it in his programming, but you introduced yourself to strangers. To people. "You feel free to look around my home. This is your home too. There's a power board in the office when you need it. You can come to me at any time if you need anything."

He didn't move or look at me. His eyes were black irises and they stared through the glass of the window, as if it could look back. Maybe he saw his own reflection, faint as it was. Maybe he wanted to wait until night when it would become clearer. Or maybe he just wanted to watch the maple tree sway, and the children walking by on the sidewalk on their way home from school.

• • • •

I had my routines pretty well established by now. Since my own discharge two years ago, and once the bulk of the physio was under my belt, I'd acclimated back home, got a job through the veterans program working net security for the local university. Despite what my mother said, I took care of myself. My war benefits allowed for some renovation of the bungalow—ramps and wide doorways and the like. When it was time for bed I left the chair beside it and levered myself onto the mattress. Some shifting later and I lay beneath the covers on my back, staring up at the ceiling. I didn't hear him in the living room at all. Eventually I called off the lights and darkness led me to sleep.

• • • •

I didn't know what woke me—maybe instinct. But I opened my eyes and a shadow stood in the doorway of my bedroom. For a second my heart stopped, then started up again at twice the pace until I saw that he didn't move, he wasn't going berserk, he wasn't preparing to kill me. Of course he wasn't. My mother didn't know the reality. Going to war didn't make you a murderer—it made you afraid.

His shape stood black against the moonlight behind him, what came through the living room window on the other end of the hall.

"Mark?"

He didn't answer.

"Mark, what's wrong?"

A foolish question, maybe, but he could parse that I meant right this second. Not the generality of what was wrong. Not the implication of what was wrong with *him.* What had drawn him from the window and to the threshold of my room?

I pushed myself up on my elbows and opened my mouth to call up the lights.

But he turned around and disappeared down the hallway, back toward the living room

and his standing post by the window.

• • • •

He was still there in the morning when I rolled through the living room on my way to the kitchen. As if he hadn't moved all night. Past his shoulders, in the early day outside, the children walked the opposite way now, some of them skipping on their way to school. A few of them held hands with their parents, mothers and fathers.

"Do you need a power up?" I said from in front of the fridge. To remind him that he had a board in the office. No answer. So I took out my eggs and toast and made myself some breakfast. I had to give him time; it always took time.

• • • •

A little after fifteen hundred hours when the schools let out, I got a knock on my front door. I was in the office so it took me a few seconds to get to the foyer, punch open the door, face the man and woman standing like missionaries on my porch. Behind them at the bottom of my driveway stood another man with three kids by his side. I looked up at the two directly in front of me.

"Can I help you?"

"Hello," the man said, looking down at me. To his credit, he didn't adopt the surprised and awkward mien of someone unused to confronting a person in a chair. If anything he seemed a little impatient. "My name's Arjan and this is Olivia. We were just wondering . . . well, we were a little concerned about your . . . the Mark model in your window."

I glanced behind me toward the living room, saw the back of his shoulders and the straight stance of his vigil.

"What about him?"

"He's creeping out our kids," said Olivia. "Twice they've gone by and he's just standing there. He's not a cat. What's wrong with him?"

If you had a double-vee, you knew about the Mark androids. Ten years ago, the reveal by the military had garnered a lot of press and criticism, but ultimately people preferred sending look-alike soldiers into battle rather than their own sons and daughters. All of the Marks looked the same, so they were easily identifiable; nobody could mistake them for human despite the indistinguishability of the cosmetics. The adoption program had garnered similar press and criticism; the VA had looked into my neighborhood before releasing Mark to me. We were supposed to be a tolerant, liberal piece of society here.

That was the theory, anyway.

"He's not doing anything, he just likes to look out the window."

"All day?" Olivia said.

"Have you been outside my house all day?" Because otherwise why would it bother

her if she only went by twice a day to pick up her kids, and that took all of two minutes?

Arjan seemed more temperate, his impatience dissipated. “Just . . . perhaps if during the hours when the children come and go from school, you sit him down somewhere else?”

“He won’t hurt anybody.”

“Can you, please?” Arjan gazed at me with some hint of that pity now. Not wanting to push in case I had a flashback or dumped my life story at his feet to explain why I didn’t have the use of my legs.

Being a good neighbor meant picking your battles. Unlike what was happening in deep space and the war. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to try to coax Mark into another activity. “I’ll see what I can do.”

• • • •

I looked out the window with him for a minute, probably five. Slowly the kids faded away until no more of them traipsed by on the sidewalk. Cars drifted at suburban speed, quiet hums in irregular intervals that penetrated glass. From the look of the sky, we were going to get rain.

“I want to show you something, Mark.” I blinked up at his impassive jawline, and above that the long dark lashes. They’d made them handsome, in a way. Not superstar plastic, but an earthy attractiveness. Gradation in the dark hair, some undertone of silver, as if life would ever age them. “Mark. Come with me.” I touched his sleeve then began to push across the floor.

He followed—because I’d ordered him or because he wanted to, it was impossible to tell. Something had drawn him to my bedroom last night, so he was capable of operating on his own volition. I led him into the office and wheeled myself out of the way, near the couch. One wall braced a floor to ceiling bookshelf, with actual physical books stacked neatly row to row. My one ongoing possession of worth: my collection. They’d gone past the label of rare and become worthless. Nobody much cared for tangibles anymore, things you could hold in your hands that gave off a woody scent when the pages flipped.

None of the books were first editions or leatherbound. They weren’t museum quality. But that was why I liked them—they were everyday, made to be handled without gloves.

“Maybe you can explore?” I pointed to the shelf. “There are some classics there. I know they don’t download literature for you, but you can learn the old-fashioned way. If you want.”

He stared at the colorful spines as if they meant nothing to him. Probably didn’t. His head was full of strategy and tactics, and if any history existed in his brain matrices, it was related to war. They’d believed the data shouldn’t be corrupted with frivolity: no poetry or plays or pop culture references.

But he wasn’t in the war anymore. And he wasn’t walking out of the room. This way, maybe, he wouldn’t stand for hours in front of the window.

I left him in there.

• • • •

Through the double-vee, a calm, vaguely upper class male British voice explained how scientists were able to save the Bengal tiger from extinction eighty-five years ago through a combination of rewilding, genetic intervention, and ruthlessly wiping out poachers regardless of geographical borders. Rising quietly above the sounds of large cats huffing and animal protectionist gunfire, the low keen of something more human and distressed filtered past the sound panels and made me turn from the vee, toward the office.

The time on the wall said he'd been in there a little more than an hour. I should've checked sooner.

I found him in the corner, wedged between the bookshelf and the end of the desk. Sitting rigid with the eyeline of a house pet. I only wheeled in so far before stopping, careful to watch his eyes, but he wasn't looking at me. Some blank spot a meter in front of him held his attention. By his feet, splayed like a wounded bird, lay a trade-sized book, print side up. I couldn't see the title.

"Mark?"

This passed for crying on a face that couldn't shed tears. That sound, a wounded thing.

"Mark."

I was so used to the reality of rain that hearing it now against the windows only drew my attention because it drew his. His eyes widened and he put his hands in his hair.

"It's okay." I rolled closer, slow. He stopped keening and somehow the silence was worse. His elbows joined with knees until he was a black shard lodged between furniture. I stopped and picked up the book, turned it over.

For Whom the Bell Tolls.

The cover was some faded hue of purple and green, with an image of a shadowed soldier, a road, and a bridge. I'd read this book long ago, before my own war. I barely remembered it, but I remembered loving it. That must've been what it was like with people sometimes. Mark didn't look up, so I flipped the book over and read a random line on the page, where he'd either left off or where the book had opened when he'd tossed it. *Every one needs to talk to some one . . . Before we had religion and other nonsense. Now for every one there should be some one to whom one can speak frankly, for all the valor that one could have one becomes very alone.*

"'We are not alone. We are all together,'" I recited to him from the book, a little like you'd speak scripture.

But he didn't look up and he didn't say a word.

• • • •

Eventually he returned to the window, but at night. The next morning the rain stopped and in an hour started up again. I needed to go shopping for groceries, preferred that to ordering them in, but struggling through the wet was a chore, so instead I set up a Scrabble board in the living room, on the coffee table. I shook the tiles in the velvet bag until I felt him look over. It was a gamble whether he'd be interested, but during breakfast I'd noticed the book on the windowsill in front of him. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

"Wanna play?" I shook the bag again.

It took a minute but he walked over and sat down on the couch across from me. If we played long enough he wouldn't be looking outside when the kids went home.

I explained the rules to him, knew I only had to say them once. He stared at the board and my hands and then stuck his hand into the bag and pulled his seven tiles, which he set on his tile bar precisely and carefully hidden from my eyes. He wouldn't speak but I thought at least this way he could make words.

I went first and lay down ATOMIC. I was a little proud of that.

He made TIGER.

I got ROUGE.

He made EQUINE. I said, "Good word!" Not like I was praising a dog, but because it was interesting to see how he formed these words out of his programming. He won the first game but I was almost expecting that; it was like playing against a computer. It *was* playing against a computer. His vocabulary was ten times what mine was; I knew I was bound to lose when he began to use Latin. Not because his creators had programmed Latin for him, but because he understood the derivation of the language. He must have had that somewhere in his files.

As we were setting up the next game, my mother called. I talked to the house system, without visual. "I'm busy, call back later."

Mark stared at me. It could have been a dead kind of regard but as he rarely looked me in the eyes, I took it for inquiry. "My mother." That didn't make him bat a lash. "You play first."

Twenty minutes into the game his words grew shorter and shorter, barely gleaning six or eight points. His eyes remained lowered to the board. ONE. TO. ARE.

"Mark? Is something wrong?"

At night, before bed, I'd reviewed his downloads from the VA hospital, tried to find some string of code or something in the reports that the doctors might have missed. I wasn't a doctor, I'd only been a rifle fighter, but maybe it took one soldier to understand another. His muteness was voluntary and I couldn't forget that.

I looked at the spread on the board. The game didn't matter. After sorting through the letters left in the bag and usurping a couple already displayed, I lay down some tiles separate from the game and turned the board toward him.

WORRIED.

He didn't move, his hands on his knees. I watched his lids twitch as his eyes mapped the board. I made more words for him.

ABOUT YOU.

It took eight minutes for him to reach for the board. With the tips of both his forefingers, he slid the tiles around like a magician did cards on a tabletop. Then he swung the board back toward me.

SAD.

What could I say? I touched my legs. I saw his gaze follow that. Then I made more words too.

I KNOW.

• • • •

The shelter wanted reports from me and after the first week, they considered it a breakthrough. Never mind that Mark hadn't said anything past that single word, Scrabble or otherwise. He just returned to his window. I went about my days with work, sometimes sitting on my bed with my system, sometimes in the office, and when he wouldn't dislodge himself from his post, I sat on the couch and looked at his back. I scoured his files for clues. He didn't play the game again but he carried that book with him when he powered up on the seventh day.

• • • •

"I wanted to check in," my mother said. "See if you were still alive."

This passed for humor in her world. Her face on my relay was cautious. Out of spite, maybe, I turned my system so the camera picked up Mark, standing by the window, a black arrow of false serenity with sun on his skin.

"What's he doing?" she said.

"Looking out the window."

"For what?"

I almost said "nothing." But it occurred to me that soldiers stood watch and this might not have been a simple metaphor for his position.

"Enemies. So you better call before you come over."

This passed for humor in my world. She didn't laugh, but I did.

• • • •

The benefits of working from home meant I could take naps in the afternoon. Like a cat, I stretched myself onto the angle of sun that cut through my bedroom window, warm after days of rain, and shut my eyes, soaking up rays without fear of burning or UV—all house glass came treated.

The front door opening woke me up. I didn't hear it shut.

Either way, nobody should've been going in or out—unless it was Mark.

It took me two minutes to get myself in the chair and out to the door. "Mark!" Out and

down the ramp, rapid, onto the sidewalk, look left, look right. Nothing. "Mark!"

My vis tracked his location chip, all Mark models had them from the factory. Deeply embedded in their craniums. The dot on my optical display put him in transit, but at a speed that indicated running, not in a vehicle. At least. I rolled that way, past flat, cloned houses and uniform lawns, looking through the overlay across my vision until I spied the tall, black-clad figure in the park. The shadows on either side—other people—barely registered.

"Mark." I could shout, but with him now in my line of sight, startling could be worse. He stood facing the manufactured lake and people were pulling their kids away from him. Expecting a weapon or an explosion, who knew.

My hands burned. I hadn't worn gloves. Wheels bumped the edge of grass that led down an embankment to the carefully placed rocks, and further toward cold, cobalt water that lapped the shore. He'd been afraid of rain but he ran to water. If he'd been running to this place at all. Maybe he'd just run.

I wished for the Scrabble board, the only thing that had garnered a response from his broken programming. Instead I touched my red and callused hand to the edge of his as it hung at his side.

He twitched, that was all.

"Let's walk?" An offer. I looked down at my legs. "So to speak." Walk before someone called the cops, or a child screamed, or something propelled him to plunge into the lake where I couldn't follow. Should he have decided to sink himself to the bottom of the lake, none of these people would likely try to stop him. "Walk with me, Mark. Please?"

I tried to wheel backward so I could turn around on the path that surrounded the lake. But before I made the full one-eighty, hands took hold behind my chair and pushed.

I let go of the wheel rims and rubbed my palms against my thighs. Looked up and back at his forward gaze. He gave me nothing but the direction of his stride and his acquiescence in silence. It was enough.

• • • •

We took walks twice a day now, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It hadn't been my intention to cross paths with the schoolchildren, but those were the hours that made sense—before my work began and on a break before the last couple hours of my day—and they gave him some life to look at. Others in the neighborhood strolled with their dogs, but Mark walked with me. Sometimes he pushed the chair, but most of the time we went side by side. Sometimes I talked, idly gossiping about this neighbor or that, or noted the types of trees and flowers we passed. Information that he wouldn't ordinarily possess because the places he'd been trained for in deep space hadn't come with roses and Japanese maples.

More than once, Arjan or Olivia or somebody else from the neighborhood frowned at

us. The children were inquisitive, a few of them asking aloud as we passed where Mark had come from and what was wrong with him. “Aren’t they supposed to be in war?” The parents shushed them and pulled them away.

“He came home,” I told them. “He needed a family.”

I hoped that would get through to the adults, but they just smiled at me half-assed, as if I needed to apologize for the truth.

• • • •

I dreaded bad weather now. The night we had another thunderstorm I found Mark back in the corner of the library, making that tearless keening noise. I couldn’t turn off the sky so I sat with him, lights on, talking softly. I picked up his Hemingway book from the floor and read to him. It seemed to calm him, having that focus. Maybe working out a plot, the drama and emotion of a fictional piece. The war in the book was so far removed from his own, yet truths existed across centuries when the common denominator was humanity.

Eventually, when my eyes grew weary sometime in the middle of the night, I closed the book and looked into his dark open gaze. His arms wrapped around his legs.

“Do you want to come into my room? You don’t have to sit in the office all night—” Or stand at the window, “—but I think I need to lie down.” I was really asking him if he wanted the company. Or asking him because I did. He didn’t need to stand vigil at the window, through cloudy moonlight and racketing storm.

So he followed me to my bedroom. Helped me onto the bed without my asking. Even drew the covers up. I called off the lights and Mark, in silence, sat at the foot of my bed facing the door.

• • • •

In the morning he was gone—at least as far as the living room. I rolled out yawning and spied the Scrabble board on the coffee table, Mark sitting on one side. It made me smile. Taking initiative? I could picture the eager android psychologists ticking off their checklists, revisiting his memory files, trying to draw connections between Mark’s habits here and his experiences in the war.

He felt no threat here, that was the difference. At least I hoped he didn’t. Under observation and treated like a programmed computer back at the hospital, he must have still been wary. Who wouldn’t?

I made scrambled eggs and toast and joined him at the table. He pulled the letter C and started first.

It wasn’t for the game. He searched around in the bag until he found the letters he needed to spell.

LOST.

I looked at him, trying to determine the exact meaning. It was impossible to know. So I

reached for the velvet bag myself.

HERE.

No question marks, I had only my eyes to ask it. He shook his head. Made another word.

COMPANY.

For a few moments I was confused. My company? But then—no. *A* company. *His* company. He was the survivor of a skirmish out at the Belt. None of the others had made it. The official report said ambush, but that had seemed scant even to me. Maybe some of the details had been redacted from his memory and thus what they'd given me, and he didn't even know anymore. But the body remembered. Maybe more of him remembered than all of the engineers and psychologists were willing to acknowledge.

I laid more tiles. HOW.

But he didn't say anything. Instead he just stared at the board then turned it toward me so I saw the question. And he looked at my legs.

Fair enough. "Shrapnel." I stretched my arm behind me. "My spine."

When he looked in my eyes, he didn't have to say a word. I saw that he understood. Some things technology couldn't fix—especially when you didn't have the means. Sometimes we injured ourselves, or we were injured, and the wounds stuck around. Like memories or the impact of them.

• • • •

Rather than standing at the window all night like an effigy, Mark took to staying in my room. Maybe he figured I'd need the help if I somehow flopped out of bed, or probably because he wasn't simple, he knew I liked the company. Years of sleeping alone, literally in a silent room without even the bodily noises of comrades in other bunks, and the isolation had become pungent. Over the days he and I established our own routine, not discussed because he still didn't talk beyond random words on the Scrabble board, and even then sometimes he didn't talk at all and just played the game.

The doctors said it was still progress. I didn't tell them about Mark sitting in my bedroom at night, but I did report that he began to bring me books from the office and liked me to read aloud to him. Sometimes he had no sense of timing about it. I'd be working and he'd just appear next to me and set down a novel on my lap. Classic war novels. *The Red Badge of Courage. All Quiet on the Western Front. Half of a Yellow Sun.* He wouldn't go away until I covered at least a chapter. I acted annoyed, but he knew I wasn't. Whether that was through his ability to read human body language and gauge tone of voice, or more likely because he just knew me by now.

He still hated storms and we were deep into spring. It was the worst when one night the power went out.

The neighborhood outside fell to darkness. Inside, only the glow from my comp on its backup provided some illumination. The moon high outside the office window sat

obscured by rainclouds.

Mark darted from the living room where he often still stood watch, right into the office where I was working. He didn't trip or crash into anything and I remembered his eyes had night vision capability. I didn't need to see his face to understand the plea.

"It's okay, the lights'll come back up soon." I rolled away from the desk and motioned out of the room. Tried to keep my voice casual, even if I could feel the tension dopplering out from his body in the dark. "Let's go hang out."

He loomed, near invisible in the shadows. He didn't even breathe and at least didn't keen anymore, didn't feel that level of pain at the upset. But his hand landed on my shoulder and clenched. Only his footfalls made sound as he followed me down the hall to the bedroom, which had become a refuge from all that scared him. A routine of safety.

I levered myself to the bed to sit and he climbed on beside me, legs and arms folded. Not quite with his back to the door or window, he never allowed that, but he eased into facing me at an angle at least.

And this was how we waited out the storm.

• • • •

Of course my mother had a key to my house; she'd insisted after I'd gotten out of the hospital, "just in case" living on my own in my "state" proved too difficult. Maybe I should've anticipated her worry. Every time she called she implied that Mark was a ticking bomb, so I just stopped answering her calls. Maybe she was in the neighborhood or maybe she did get in her car to drive a half hour to check if I was alive. Either way, through the storm she arrived and through the storm Mark heard her before I did.

We sat in the near-dark and I was reading to him from the light of my comm. "'He saw that to be firm soldiers they must go forward. It would be death to stay in the present place . . .'" And at that exact moment Mark launched off the bed and out the door with the precision of a guided missile.

I was fumbling for my chair, images in my mind of fang-toothed, angry neighbors storming my front door with pitchforks, when my mother's shriek penetrated every surface between the foyer and my bedroom.

"Mark!" Ass in the seat, hands on the wheels. "Mark!" I rolled out to see my mother face down on the floor, arms triangled behind her back, wrists caught in the vise of Mark's one-handed grip. "Stand down, soldier."

"Get him off me, Tawn! Get this crazy fu—"

"Shut *up,* Mom!" I stopped close enough to touch Mark's arm. Beneath his sleeve felt like iron. I kept my voice quiet because I couldn't see his eyes in the dark: "It's okay. It's my mother. It's okay." I repeated it until he let her go and stepped back near to the wall. Becoming motionless.

"Mom."

"He's crazy! What did I tell you!"

"Mom, tone it *down."* I didn't offer to help her up. She wouldn't have accepted it.

She propelled herself to her feet in a pitch and yaw. "Look what he did to my wrists!" She stuck her hands toward me. In the cracks of lightning and illumination, I saw vague shadows. Maybe bruises.

"You're all right, you're fine. Come sit down. You should've rung the doorbell, he thought you were breaking in."

"I have a key!"

"I told you to call ahead."

"My own son!"

I went to Mark and held his sleeve. "Come over here, man." My mother wasn't listening; she could stand by the door and bleat until it passed.

Mark followed me to the living room where I hoped he would sit, but instead he went to the window, his post, and stared out. He didn't have to breathe and he didn't say a word, but I knew the entire ruckus unnerved him. There was no other word for it. It reverbed through my body.

"Is that what he does all day?" my mother demanded behind me.

"Can you at least lower your voice? You aren't helping."

"I'm not helping!"

"MOM."

We both stopped. Mark had turned around, now with his back to the window. His body blotted out what light came in from the street, creating a vacuum in my vision. So he could face us dead on. It was like the stare of a sarcophagus.

My mother turned her back to him. "I'm worried for you, Tawn."

"You don't have to be."

"This isn't normal. Look at him!"

"He's fine. We're fine. We—"

But she wasn't listening. She began to walk around, feeling her way through the dark toward the office. Or my bedroom. It was so sudden when the lights flickered on and held that I had to blink spots from my vision. And in those moments Mark disappeared.

After her.

"Mark!"

I couldn't roll fast enough. I recognized his mode. Full protection, decisive defense. What he'd been built for. I wanted to hold him back but this was his nature. He wasn't the one unnerved, he wasn't the one concerned for himself. It was *my* voice he heard, that his programming responded to. My voice and its irritation and tension and impatience.

In the seconds it took me to get from the living room to my bedroom where my mother had gone, I saw it ahead of me. In the span of his back and the straightness of his spine. In the precise way he seized my mother before she could set hands on my possessions. He spun her around.

She struck him. Reflex or intent, I didn't know. Of course it didn't affect him at all, didn't even bruise him. He didn't flinch.

Instead he dragged her to my window, opened it, and pitched her out.

• • • •

Luckily my house was a bungalow.

She said she'd wanted to pack me a bag and take me away from any danger. That if she did that for me I couldn't protest and would've been forced to go with her and ditch this mad idea of taking care of a military model. She had never understood that we wanted to take care of ourselves.

She didn't understand—when the VA engineers came to take him away—that he was my company and I was his.

• • • •

In the hospital they ran more tests on him. It was procedure because she'd filed a complaint. I gave my own statement: that he'd felt I was threatened, that he'd only been defending me, that my mother was crazy in her own right (I reworded that part a little). She'd disregarded my words and his existence. If I restricted her access to me or she learned to interact better, there would be no more problems.

And, yes, I wanted him home again. He belonged there—where I could read to him, where we could play games, and where he might one day be able to speak to me. He'd made a place beside me and at my window. He'd learned my routines and created ones of his own. He wanted to know all the books on my shelves. He liked walking in the sun.

He protected me. I wouldn't strip that from him.

They let me see him once while he was in the hospital. He lay on a stiff bed with transparent monitoring tape stuck to his temples. Little dots of glowing blue and red on the tape winked at me while his dark eyes stared blinkless, asking no questions.

I touched his arm. His skin felt cold. Human warmth didn't course through his veins. He didn't even have veins. None of it mattered. "Mark. Hey man, don't worry."

His head tilted, eyes met mine.

I gripped his hand. After a moment his fingers curled around mine, just as strong. Even stronger. I said, "The storm's gone and you're coming home."

• • • •

The children were walking on their way to school when we pulled up to the drive. It was a warm day, the kind where you wore light open jackets and began to roll up your sleeves in anticipation of summer. With the car windows down we heard their voices all the way to the school, to the yard. They sounded as colorful as their clothes and seemed to carouse right through the leaves to where we sat.

He hadn't said a word on the ride, only looked out the window. The parents passing behind on the sidewalk noticed us there; I spied the glances on the rearcam of the car. A

couple of them paused as if debating whether to approach, to ask why we were just sitting on my own driveway doing nothing.

But they didn't approach and I looked at Mark's profile. "You know . . . people are going to be like my mother. Like the neighbors. That's just the way it is until they get used to us." Not just him, but us.

I'd learned not to expect conversation but he did make contact in his own way. No Scrabble board lay between us but he turned his hands palm up and open. He looked at me.

What answer could I give him? That people were afraid, or lazy, or just plain ignorant? Who could we blame? The government, the military, the doctors and engineers?

We were both on probation. Mark, so he wouldn't injure somebody. And me, so I wouldn't let him.

"Where do you think this will lead?" my mother had asked. "You rehabilitate him or whatever they want to call it, and then what?"

Somehow it was impossible for her to understand. "Then he'll choose," was all I'd said.

Maybe one day he'd discover what had happened to his unit. Maybe I would help him. Or maybe we'd leave it alone because some memories were best left in the dark.

Before we went inside the house I caught his attention again, touched his shoulder. "The doctors say you're capable of speaking but you just choose not to. Sometimes that happens with people—"

"I am people," he said. His voice was lighter than I thought it would be, if hoarse from disuse. He was looking back out the window again. The sidewalk stretched clear now. "I am a person," he said to the glass. To the outside world.

They had created him to task but with the capacity for emotion. He was perfectly vulnerable, just enough, even for war.

When he slid from the car to head into the house, eventually I followed him, calling the chair from the back of the car to lever myself into it. I rolled up the ramp to the front door, where Mark stood, holding it open for me even though he didn't have to.

It was just the human thing to do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Lowachee was born in South America, grew up in Canada, and worked in the Arctic. Her first novel, *Warchild,* won the 2001 Warner Aspect First Novel Contest. Both *Warchild* (2002) and her third novel, *Cagebird* (2005), were finalists for the Philip K. Dick Award. *Cagebird* won the Prix Aurora Award in 2006 for Best Long-Form Work in English and the Spectrum Award also in 2006. Her second novel, *Burndive,* debuted at #7 on the Locus Bestseller List. Her books have been translated into French, Hebrew, and Japanese, and her short stories have appeared in anthologies edited by Julie Czerneda, Nalo Hopkinson, John Joseph Adams, and Ann VanderMeer. Her fantasy novel, *The Gaslight Dogs,* was published through Orbit Books USA.

Depot 256

Lisa Allen-Agostini | 2,800 words

June 20.

Coño, I fucking hate it here.

Dead-end pueblo in the middle of nowhere. Not even in the middle; that implies we have some kind of importance, some kind of distinction: as if, of all the dead-end pueblos in nowhere, we were at the very centre.

Instead, we actually on the fringes of nowhere. If nowhere is a place, we on the outskirts. If is a person, we's the wart on his ass. We have no pips. None. There is never, ever anything to do here.

My pueblo is in Nuevo Morvant, a country best known for its Gun Depots. And by "best," I mean "only." Nobody ever comes here except to buy guns, or to deliver them. I live half a mile from Rifle Depot 256 and trust me, I know. It takes a buyer roughly five minutes to drive in, test fire her semi-automatic rifle, deposit payment in cocaine credits, and drive out. Five minutes. Sometimes they don't even test fire, just drive in, pay and drive out—two minutes and change if they drive real slow.

I can hear the shots when they test them, the guns. They *ratatatat* just like in one of those old TV shows, or like a snare drum. I've seen a guy play a snare drum on my tablet: *ratatatat ratatatat*. Say what; at least I not living near an RPG Depot: *boooodooooommmm*. Must be hell on your nerves, all those explosions. Or maybe you get used to it, your ears deaf to the blasts and numb to the whoosh of the air rushing from the explosion into your little plastic house. I am used to the sound of gunshots. Sometimes I don't even notice them anymore. I study my English and watch old movies on the tablet the Depot gave me and try to forget how hungry I am all the time.

Saturday mornings are nice, though. They let anybody in to play on the range; there's no shooting then, it's just a big, wide grassy field with targets standing here and there like blind, holey watchmen. If you pick up enough spent shells, with the money the Depot will pay you for them you can buy an emparedado, maybe a Joo-Cee.

That's what I did last week.

But it's not Saturday yet. It's Wednesday. My rations are almost finished and since I'm (officially) an orphan, there's nobody in the house to share their rations with me. I'm so fucking hungry I could eat this tablet I'm writing on. Crunch up that glass and plastic and gold and copper and aluminum and feel it slide right down my throat like a fine dish. Maybe it would taste like the arepas I heard my granny used to make long ago. My dad told me about his mom, and about her arepas, before he disappeared.

• • • •

June 23.

I met another girl when I went looking for shells today on the shooting range at the

Depot. Her name is Annie. She's new in the pueblo. She walks with a limp. She says she wants to save up to buy a wetsuit, to go swimming over to Macuro, in Venezuela.

It gets cold out there in the Bocas, she said.

I think it's crazy; with all the narcos out there on speedboats in the rough, wild water and the Guardia and the Police and the Coast Guard and the Cuban Navy, too, in their cutters, it's crazy. I said to her, Annie, that's batshit crazy. You'll drown. You'll get shot. Half the people who try it never make it. If you survive they'll just send you right back here.

But she wouldn't listen to me. She told me how when she was little, her uncle accidentally shot her in the foot and since then she's been obsessed with the idea of getting surgery to fix it. You can get that in Venezuela, where there are hospitals and surgeons and all that. Not like here. Nuevo Morvant doesn't have a fucking bandaid.

When she walks, her right foot drags like a flipper in the dust and raw sewage in the street. She said her family puts a bucket of sand by the front door for when she wants to come inside. She puts her foot in it and sort of rubs it around; that gets most of the crap off it.

I said if it were me I'd hose her foot off, but she laughed at me. We never have enough water since the government stopped piping water to District 256. Officially, it's the Depot's job to give the pueblos water. But, like food, we haven't had water in our houses for as long as I can remember. There just isn't any. If you can, you make do with canal water or schlep a bucket or two of potable water from the Depot. If you can't, hard luck for you.

Annie has twenty credits saved up. She needs five more for a basic wetsuit—ten if she wants a full-body one. That's not counting the flippers. Maybe she could use her broken foot to paddle with, maybe that's what it's good for.

When I bought my emparedado—zaboca and goat—I gave her a bite. But she has a family, so she gets food at home sometimes. Most every day, she said. Not like me. Maybe that's why she's so much bigger than me.

• • • •

June 30.

I miss my mother. I wonder what she's doing. I wonder what Venezuela's like. I wonder why she never emails.

• • • •

July 4.

The Depot set off fireworks tonight for Independence Day. They were really pretty. I wish I could have watched them forever, those sparkling colours and shimmering shapes in the red night sky.

Annie and me sat on my roof and watched them, just like all the other kids in District 256 were doing on their own roofs. Miles away, in the distance, we could see and hear other Depots setting off their own fireworks. I like to think ours were the best. But maybe every kid in every pueblo thinks that.

Annie was still intent on getting those last ten credits to buy her wetsuit. I told her there's no way she's going to swim across the strait of the Bocas del Dragón because it's nearly sixty miles wide and getting wider by the day as sea levels rise. It used to be only twenty, when my mother was a girl.

Annie just called me a stupid head and a bamsee crease and said she's been practicing her swimming.

Where? I said.

That is my business, she said. She turned a funny colour and then started to give me a history lecture about how we used to be our own country and now we are a colony and how her uncle says we should break down the Depots and take the island back from the Americanos so it can be the Independent Republic of Trinidad again like it used to be. When she gets to Venezuela she's going to make contact with the revolutionaries there and —

I said, that is the same uncle who shot your foot? Some revolutionary he is.

And she shut up and we watched the fireworks pop and *ratatatat* in the sky.

• • • •

July 7.

I didn't see Annie all day.

• • • •

July 9.

When I saw Annie this morning she looked very angry, and she wanted to beat me up. And when I asked her why, she said it's all my fault.

What is my fault?

She went on the beach and practiced her swimming and the driver she went with had sex with her.

How is that my fault?

It just is, she said.

But I never tell you to go on the beach with no pendejo, I said.

But you never told me not to, she said.

Which was just so utterly ridiculous I couldn't even answer her.

But the good part is that the man gave her five credits after and so now she only has to collect eight hundred more spent shells for her to get the next five credits, and she can buy her wetsuit.

I don't want her to go to Macuro, but she hates it here worse than me and I think that hatred is like a little engine in her body, pushing her and pushing her.

I told her next time she wants to go and practice her swimming, she should tell me and I will go with her. To protect her, I told her. She laughed in my face.

Never mind, I said. Then we watched an old movie on her tablet. It was called *Big*. Some white kid made a wish and became an adult. Why would anybody do that? I wondered. He had toys and parents and a bike and water and food. It was a different world back then.

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July 14.

Annie and me went to pick up shells today. We got only five hundred. I give her half the credits even though I picked up more shells. The colonizador in the Depot tried to shortchange us, but I wasn't having it.

Pay me what you owe me or I will fuck you up, pendejo.

He was eating a sandwich. He looked at my ragged pants and my dirty face. That's my offer, sweetheart, he said. Take it or leave it.

I put the shells back into my old bucket—they used to give us flour in buckets like that, my dad told me one time. I was about to walk away when he said he was just joking. But there was no smile on his face.

Next time I'm going to sell them by the beach when Annie goes swimming again. The problem with that is you have to look out for smartmen who want to hustle you and steal your money. There's nothing like trust and honesty in Nuevo Morvant. Those fuckers would take advantage of a runt and a cripple, easy. Well, that's what I've heard. I've never been to the beach before. Annie said her uncle's a driver and he usually takes her there so she can learn to swim better. It's a long way across the Bocas and everybody in her family is rooting for her to go so she can send back money and food.

• • • •

July 21.

We looked extra hard for shells today. The grass in the shooting range is long and soft and green, and you have to be careful when you're looking because it's easy to miss the shells in between. Though they're bright copper, because the sun is hardly ever visible through all the smog, you have to squint and strain to make them out in the grass.

I wondered out loud why the grass only grows in the Depot and not out in the road where we live.

Annie laughed at me again. Don't you know the Depot controls the water? You know all that fancy English but you don't know shit. No wonder you don't have any friends.

I said, did your uncle tell you that, too? And it shut her up for a little bit.

Anyway, the morning passed and she said she had to meet her uncle's friend, Juanie, to go to the beach to practice her swimming. I told her I'd go with her this time.

Juanie was a skinny little peón with big ears and big teeth, like a wolf. I've seen pictures of wolves. He drives a Hummer, one of the huge, bulletproof stretch limos the buyers hire when they are coming into the pueblos to shop at the Depots. He gets Saturdays off because there are no buyers on a Saturday. I saw how he looked at Annie. He had eyes like a wolf, too.

The Hummer was white and shiny, kind of like the whale in *Moby Dick*. Juanie put down old sheets on the seats so we didn't dirty the leather. Annie sat in the front seat next to him. I sat in the back alone. Don't touch anything, he said. I won't. I don't. I can't. All I can do is look hungrily at the minifridge in the back of the car and hope Juanie feels sorry for me and gives me one of the boxes of sushi Annie says he keeps in there for his clients.

No such luck. If there was sushi in the fridge, I never even smelled it. Every few minutes I could see Juanie glancing at me in the rear view mirror with a sour expression. I think he wanted to get Annie alone again. It's not every day you get to fuck a virgin. Well, I mean, she used to be a virgin before they had sex.

When we got to the beach it was the first time I had ever seen so much water. I wanted to run in and drink it but Annie said I couldn't because it was salty and it would kill me, and too besides it wasn't clean anyway. There was all kind of shit in it—literally, shit from the toilets of the hotels on the beachfront, and all kinds of pollution and fuel and crap from the ships that dock off the coast. Nuevo Morvant is an important arms trading nation, a vital cog in the cocaine industry. We in the pueblos mightn't know it, but we were part of something bigger than just Depot communities. The Depots were central to the economy, and to the whole wide world. Cocaine makes the world go round and guns keep the cocaine running.

Annie took off her panty and t-shirt and jumped in the water. I took off mine, too, and followed her. It was cold. I'd never been entirely covered in water before. It felt very funny—and very cold—but I liked it a lot. I couldn't feel my toes.

I stayed in the shallow part and sat down on the sand, picking up pebbles and weighing them in my hand before throwing them into the water where they would disappear: *du-thunksplash*. I licked my lips and thought I could understand what Annie said about the water being too salty to drink: It made my mouth taste good. And I was hungry again, and thirsty, too.

Juanie was leaning up on the side of the Hummer, digging his teeth with a plastic toothpick. Give me some sushi, I told him.

I was smaller than Annie and for a minute I thought he was going to laugh at me, but he watched me with them wolf eyes this time. What you going to give me if I give you some sushi?

I'm a virgin, too, I told him.

Afterwards, when I was full, I took our bucket of spent shells and sold them to a bored-looking kid in a plastic shed at the side of the road. He gave me a good price.

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July 22.

Annie was still vexed with me for fucking Juanie yesterday but I told her it didn't matter, didn't she get half the sushi and the Joo-Cee Juanie bought for me?

Yes, but.

But what, I said.

Nothing, she said.

She is going back and swim again today, she said. She can swim for eight hours straight. Now she just needs her wetsuit. She has enough money now and she said she will give it to her uncle to buy it for her.

I wish I could swim, too, instead of just sitting around here all day listening to the machine guns go *ratatatat* and watching movies about a world that doesn't exist anymore.

• • • •

(Later)

Annie come running up the road to my house, her flipper foot dragging behind her and leaving a trail in the dust, to show me her wetsuit. It's not new; it's been around the block a few times. You can see patches in the rubber. One's the shape of a big, giant crescent moon. Maybe it's a shark bite. I've seen pictures of sharks. They had mouths as big as my house.

When Annie put it on she looked like a seal. I've seen pictures of them, too. They used to look dark and shiny and sleek, like slippery black bullets in the water. I guess that is how Annie will look when she jumps in at Chaguaramas and takes her first long strokes towards Venezuela. Like a slippery black bullet scudding through the water away from me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Allen-Agostini is the author of the young adult novel *The Chalice Project* (Macmillan Caribbean, 2008), and co-editor of and contributor to the crime fiction anthology *Trinidad Noir* (Akashic Books, 2008). *Swallowing the Sky* (Cane Arrow Press, 2015) is her first collection of poems since self-publishing her chapbook *Something to Say* in 1992. In 2014 she was the inaugural Dame Hilda Bynoe Writer-in-Residence at St George's University, Grenada. Lisa was awarded a Trading Tales historical writing residency in Glasgow in 2014. She was shortlisted for the Hollick Arvon Caribbean Writers Prize (Fiction) in 2013. An award-winning journalist, she has been a reporter and columnist and is now an editor with the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian. Lisa is a recipient of a University of the West Indies (UWI) Postgraduate Scholarship and is reading for an MPhil in Interdisciplinary Gender Studies at the Institute of Gender and Development Studies, UWI, St Augustine.

Salto Mortal

Nick T. Chan | 8,400 words



"The key technique of Lucha Libre was a flip with a rear break fall, called a salto mortal (death leap) . . ."

—Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, revelations and Mexican National Identity*

Three days ago, Paul had thrown Mary onto the kitchen floor and kicked her everywhere except her face. For the first two days, the only time she left her bed was to go to the bathroom, drops of clotted blood from her insides deposited like coins in the toilet bowl.

On the third day, high on oxycodone, Mary dreamed about the lucha libre. She hadn't thought about wrestling since she'd left Mexico, but the hallucination was as bright and sharp as grief.

In the dream, Papa and Felipe were still alive and Mexico still existed. They were driving to Arena Mexico in Mexico City, sixteen hours in the rusty white pick-up. Felipe hadn't wanted to go. He loved fútbol, like everyone else. Only nacos liked lucha libre, so

why did they have to go all this way just for her?

The arena stank of fried churros, Coca-Cola, cigarettes, and sweat. Everyone else cheered when El Jaguar performed a salto mortal off the top ropes onto Dr. Wagner and then strutted around the ring as the rudo rolled in pain. She'd yelled at Dr. Wagner to get up, knowing that it was all a trick. You could never trust a rudo. It was what she loved about them. If the naguals had never invaded Mexico, maybe she'd be a ruda today, a villain in a lucha libre match in Mexico City.

In her oxycodone dream, Dr. Wagner rose while El Jaguar had his back turned. He put the técnico in a stranglehold, his eyes glittering behind his black and white mask. Then he spoke directly to her. "You must go to the CASFV near Don Haskin's center and leave your husband forever." When she woke, she wasn't sure whether he'd spoken in English or in her almost-forgotten Spanish.

The Center Against Sexual and Family Violence. For almost a day after the hallucination, she stayed in bed, unsure of what to do. It had only been a dream. But then, almost without thinking, she called the center from the toilet, whispering while running the taps.

Afterwards, each movement like a nail scraped down her bones, she'd dressed in a pair of jeans and a high-collared shirt. She'd used enough foundation to cover the bruises, taken an extra oxycodone pill, and staggered a few doors down the hallway towards the study. Each step felt like a mile, but she plastered a smile on her face.

She expected the door to be closed, but it was slightly ajar. She peeked through. Paul's back was facing her. An array of ghostly images floated in the air around him, but he paid attention to none of them, his focus taken up by the voice coming through his microphone headset.

She'd seen the tiny cameras by the backdoor, the garage, and the front door. She hadn't known about the one in the bedroom or the one facing the shower. Thank God she hadn't called the CASFV from inside the bathroom, the shower running, like she'd originally planned.

"What do you mean you've lost sight of it?" Paul said to some disembodied employee at the other end of his call. He was chewing red leaf tobacco, occasionally spitting the masticated mass of tobacco into a tin on the cedar wood desk. Talking to one of his employees who watched for naguals scaling the Wall.

She willed her heart to beat a little bit softer and stepped away from the door, heading back down the corridor. It was hard to walk quietly when each step was like a knife in her side.

"You played the speakers at low volume, bringing in juveniles only, right?" Paul said from the room. "And it's one juvenile that went through El Gueto? No cameras at all?" His voice full of self-satisfied authority. "Why can't you man the drone? You mean I've got to leave my sick wife here and come in? Yeah, she's got the flu." He lapsed into an irritated silence. "Maybe I'll come in for a couple of hours tonight. I need the walk anyway, get away from all her whining."

She'd reached the bedroom doorway when his chair squeaked. She turned and grabbed the doorframe, making it appear as if she'd just started coming from the bedroom.

Paul still wore his microphone headset, the employee's tinny voice yammering in his ear. "Hey, you're up?" From the false lightness, she knew he'd only just spotted the image of the empty bed.

"I'm feeling much better," she said brightly. "I wanted to ask whether I can go to Don Haskin's tonight and watch the wrestling?"

"Give me five minutes, Ahmed," he said into his microphone.

He pressed a button on his watch and then her internet history floated in the air in front of them. He expanded the page with the lucha libre at Don Haskins and swiped through the page, using little finger gestures to expand certain sections. After a while, he nodded, satisfied she wasn't lying. It probably helped he was always sweetness and light for a few days after he'd hit her. Paul navigated until he'd found a ticket in the disabled section.

"You won't have to walk up the stairs," he said. "If they ask for a disabled permit, give them my name." Unspoken, she'd be surrounded by gray-haired pensioners, not young men. "It finishes at ten p.m." He looked at his watch for a meaningfully long time and then he was talking to his employee as he headed back to the study.

She drove the automatic, so that the motion of shifting gears didn't claw at her insides. It wasn't until she'd driven through the University and arrived at the arena carpark that the fear started to claw at her thoughts. She was better off with him. She was nothing without Paul. She'd lost everything in her life once already. She couldn't do it again. Besides, he'd find her somehow. She should just go and watch the wrestling. But somehow, he'd *know*. He'd know she was planning to leave him and then he'd kill her.

For a moment, she couldn't seem to get enough air, like she was trying to breathe through a clogged straw. She checked her heartbeat on her watch. 140, like she was running up steep hill. She exhaled slowly until her heart rate dropped.

Inside the arena, she switched her phone off. Losing the signal inside was plausible. She swiped her smart watch at the ticket kiosk and then searched in the queue behind her for someone who looked alone. Eventually she found a fat middle-aged guy, his hair in a shaggy mullet, face red though it was cold in the air-conditioning.

"I'll give this for thirty dollars," she said. "They're in the disabled section, but you'll be right next to the ring. Long as you give me cash." He hesitated, but something in her eyes told him how badly she needed the money.

It took her an agonizing half an hour to walk to the reconstructed zone, the new housing blocks covering the concrete where the railway lines used to be. Cars drove past, ignoring her. Ignoring her even when she sank to her knees in pain, sweat dripping, her hands shaking.

Only five minutes away from the safe house, the pain made her stagger and she grabbed at a nearby lamppost. How far had she walked? She viewed the distance travelled on her watch. Paul liked her to walk at least five miles a day, said her hips were

too big. Of course she'd missed her target lately.

When she saw the address, she nearly cried with relief. After a break to gather herself, she limped to the threshold. Her hand froze just before she knocked on the door.

The watch. She was so goddamn stupid. Paul had cameras on every exit in the house, a GPS on the car and he regularly checked her phone's location. She was a stupid, useless refugiada. He probably regularly accessed the watch's online account. When he realized she wasn't coming home, he'd start looking for her. When he did, the watch would lead him straight to the women's refuge. She could move on, but the refuge itself couldn't.

She needed to return to the arena. The watch only synced to the account at midnight. If she returned home and accessed her account, she could delete tonight's exercise.

She hadn't planned on walking back. In normal circumstances, it was at least a forty-five-minute walk. Now? Too long. She'd arrive at Don Haskins after the event had finished. If she hadn't fainted from the pain beforehand. He'd know she'd been somewhere else and then he'd access her watch.

She needed to find a taxi, but they wouldn't come near the reconstructed zone. On the way, she'd seen a playground that ran past El Gueto. She didn't like going near El Gueto, but taxis wouldn't come any closer to the Wall than Sun Bowl Drive.

She walked. It wasn't until she was almost inside the playground that she saw the nagual.

It was sitting on a swing, looking for all the world like a normal child. Even this close to the Wall, children still played. But not this late at night. The only light in the playground came from a flashing blue-and-red strobe indicating it was curfew time. Naguals didn't understand warning lights or curfews. Rather than stepping onto the playground and into the nagual's field of vision, Mary shrunk back into the blackness between the sodium-white circles of light cast by the streetlights.

With the curfew, no one else was outside. The boy swung backwards and forwards, the rusted chains squeaking. If he'd been human, he might be six or seven. The same age as Felipe when she'd left him and the rest of the family behind. Copper-brown skin clean as soap, a shade darker than her own. Black hair that looked like it was delicately combed first thing in the morning and then a tangled mess a minute later. The nagual wore a new blue t-shirt, neatly tucked into the waistband of his navy shorts.

The t-shirt had a picture of a luchador on it. El Jaguar. Just like her oxycodone dream, and for a moment she doubted what she was seeing. But El Jaguar had been a popular técnico, almost retired by the time of the visitacion. It wasn't inconceivable that a nagual had seen his image. Unaware he was being watched, the nagual swung with utter abandon.

A sun-faded plastic child's bike lay abandoned at the playground's edge. Shacks surrounded the playground, most of them tin sheets loosely tied together with wire. Diesel generators chugged everywhere, sending up tea-colored clouds of smog into the night air. An entire makeshift ghetto put down smack bang on what had been railway lines.

Each shack was filled with los refugiados. Most of them people like her, ones who'd arrived just before the visitacion. Almost none from after. In the panicked days after the

visitacion, the army had shot hundreds, maybe thousands, of people trying to cross the Rio Grande and everywhere else across the border. Back then, they thought the naguals were better at imitating people than they really were.

In the distant darkness was the Wall. Looming and gray, with electrified barbed wire rolled across the top. The loudspeakers on top blared strange whistles and sounds like grinding gears. According to Paul, the sounds drove the naguals back into what had once been Mexico. Back into the purple fog that swallowed radar, swallowed drones, swallowed people.

Cameras dotted the Wall at regular intervals. While elsewhere they swept backwards and forwards like clown heads at a carnival, along this section they were still. No wonder the nagual had managed to make it across without Paul's employee seeing it.

The gueto might have been under curfew, but the prohibition was only observed in the letter of the law, not the spirit. Near the playground, where a drone or cop car might pass, blankets covered the doorways. But further back, she could hear people passing from shack to shack or standing around in the alleyways.

Somewhere, a speaker blared reggaetón over the top of the generators, competing with a more distant stereo playing something old and lilting and gentle. Pedro Vargas. Voices called out to each other, a multitude of accents and dialects. Peruvian, Mexican, Argentinian. These weren't the voices of her childhood, though. They were bitter voices, voices without hope.

If it wasn't for Paul, she'd still be here. Every week, there were stories about women turning up dead in El Gueto. Here, more than anywhere in the United States. Endless limbo, poverty, drugs, outsiders coming in to take advantage of the desperate. It was a dangerous place.

The nagual dismounted from one swing and for a moment she was afraid he'd seen her. But he'd simply decided that his current seat no longer suited him and moved across to the next one. He resumed swinging.

What should she do? No one from El Gueto was looking into the playground. She had to get to the arena. But if she left the nagual alone, then eventually it would fashion a cocoon. The cocoons bent the light, so that they were hard to see. In El Gueto, there were plenty of places for the cocoon to remain hidden. Afterwards, the adult nagual emerged and Paul had shown her photos of what happened then.

She checked her watch. She was running late.

The nagual pumped his legs to give himself momentum. Nagual kids were meant to move like marionettes, all herky-jerky. This one looked more like a real human than any nagual she'd heard about. An evolved nagual. They improved from month to month, but she'd never heard of one being this good.

The thoughtlessness with which the boy pendulumed back and forward on the swing evoked a strange sadness within her. It wasn't a child and never had been, but she'd been one once.

When you were a child, life was simpler. Back then, she'd watched the lucha libre,

adoring the luchadores enmascarados.

She'd take the nagual home and claim she'd found it wandering in the arena carpark. Say she'd mistaken it for a real boy and taken him home. Just like when Paul had taken her in.

For a nagual this good, this evolved, Paul would receive a promotion. It had been so long since she'd deserved his love, but giving him this creature would solve everything. All she had to do was make the nagual follow her.

The first time she tried to call out, the pain of movement surprised her and she swallowed the words. She gathered herself and tried again.

"Hey," she called, stepping under the streetlight so that he could see her. The boy jerked his head up, red-and-blue light strobed across his face. She limped towards the playground, trying to breathe naturally. The pain was bad enough to put a crimp in her thoughts and she dug her nails in her palms to distract from it.

"What's your name?" she said. The nagual didn't move. "Don't you know about the curfew? C'mon, let's get you home before the border patrol sees you." She half-turned away and gestured for the nagual to follow. He didn't budge.

Close-up, the little details were wrong. He was missing the little flap of skin at the front of each ear and nictitating membranes covered his eyes. The picture of El Jaguar was blurred and the letters on his t-shirt were shapeless blobs. More than a few feet away, though, she would have mistaken the nagual for a boy.

She bent over, ignoring the sharp stab in her gut, and pretended to read the nonsensical letters. "You into wrestling? Did you know I used to train? I was going to be a luchadora before I came here."

Their eyes met. She'd seen footage of naguals with eyes that were more like spider's eyes, shiny and unmoving. If not for the membranes, this nagual's eyes would have been perfect. Paul would be so happy when she brought it to him.

"You like him?" she said, pointing at the blurred image of El Jaguar on the nagual's shirt. "We can watch the lucha libre at my place."

When she said lucha libre, the nagual dismounted from the swing. "Lucha libre?" he said in a clear Chihuahua accent. "Me encanta lucha libre."

She stood there for a long time, aware that her mouth was open, but unable to do anything about it. At best, naguals were meant to parrot back phrases with no real understanding. This one clearly spoke some level of Spanish.

"Me llamo Marquetta," she said, surprising herself. How long had it been since she'd called herself *Marquetta* instead of Mary? Paul had never gotten his mouth around her real name.

"Marquetta," the boy said with evident relish, like he'd learnt a satisfying new swear word. "¡Qué nombre tan hermoso!"

"Come with me and I'll find your parents," she said. The nagual tilted his head and there was no understanding in his eyes. He didn't speak English.

She struggled to retrieve the long-forgotten phrases and put them together, words like

jigsaw pieces. Paul didn't have the patience to learn Spanish and over the past decade, she'd purposely shed it, just like she'd changed so many other things about herself. She'd changed her clothes, her make-up, the way she spoke, even the shows she watched.

"Puedes mirar lucha libre a mi casa," she eventually said and then she had his attention again. He dismounted from the swing.

"Tengo hambriente," he said. Of course. Feed him, wait for him to cocoon and he'd turn into a monster.

"Vamos," she said. "Tengo comida." She held out her hand.

He took it without complaint and trotted alongside her.

In the darkness, they moved parallel to the shantytowns at the Wall's base, eventually reaching West Sunset Drive.

The time was ticking away and Paul would have called her phone two or three times now, but reception was bad at UTEP. Anywhere too close to the Wall, reception was bad. Please God, let him just chalk it up to that. Sometimes she thought she'd rather drink bleach than take another punch.

As they walked, the nagual spoke in a rapid torrent of Spanish, but the phrases gradually coagulated into something comprehensible as she remembered what she'd forgotten. He was asking for explanations about everything they walked past. The barbed wire on top of the Wall. The speakers. The strobe lights warning that certain areas were out of bounds. What that type of car was. Why some people lived in the shacks in El Gueto and why some had houses with thick wooden doors and hulking SUVs in the driveway.

The way the nagual spoke reminded her of Felipe, full of wonder and excitement about the world. It took her a while to realize what he was doing. He was learning to become more like a person so that no one would know he was a nagual until it was too late.

Even then, she continued to answer his questions. What did it matter anyway? Once Paul had him, all her answers would be lost on the autopsy table. Maybe her, too.

Somehow, hearing the Spanish again kept the pain away. It was still there, partially buffered by oxycodone, but not so bad at all. The vague sense that maybe they should hurry, but it was too pleasant, strolling hand in hand and speaking Spanish.

Though they were holding hands, the nagual led her more than she led him. Sometimes, he'd turn down a street and she had to tug him back on the path back towards the arena. He was so strong, it was like dragging a sack of concrete and it wasn't until after he'd realized her intention that he'd actually move the way she wanted.

The third time he drifted towards the wrong street, it became clear that he was trying to head towards where she lived.

"We're going in that direction," she said. "But it's going to be quicker if we go in a car and it's parked a different way."

"To where the music starts?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

He didn't answer her question. "Why did you come here?"

"My father sent me here." She shouldn't tell him a damn thing, but the words came tumbling out anyway. "I was going to get a real job, maybe as a waitress or housekeeper. Once I had a bit of money behind me, I was going to pay a coyote to bring everyone else. Our family had been farmers for generations, but my grandfather lost the farm after NAFTA."

Talking about it felt good, made it easy not to think about what Paul might do to her.

"My favorite luchador is the grandson of El Santo," the nagual said gravely. "I like the Jaguar, but I like El Nieto del Santo more. He can catch bullets between his teeth."

She laughed. "I doubt that. Did you know his grandfather was the most famous luchador in all of Mexico?"

The nagual shook his head, his eyes wide. "My favorite was a really old one, too, Dr. Wagner. I watched him in a mask or a hair match, I can't remember which. I think they actually passed the mask on from rudo to rudo down the family, there were four or five Dr. Wagners. I haven't watched it for so long."

"Why?" he asked. "How can you love something and then forget that you loved it?"

She forced the smile. For a child, it was all so simple. You loved something and that never changed. "The year before we left, things were bad." The cartels had been fighting over a new drug, but the nagual didn't need to know that. "I didn't have time for lucha libre anymore."

The nagual looked at her sharply and her insides tightened with the lie. Even when life had been at its worst, she'd still watched it. It was only after she'd met Paul that she'd stopped. They'd walked far enough towards the arena that they'd left El Gueto and were now on dull suburban streets, ghostly blue television light spilling out onto the sidewalk. Paul was probably watching television now, the images floating in the air in front of him. Maybe he was watching one of those forensics shows that cycled in and out of fashion. He knew a lot about forensics, what opened corpses revealed. Maybe he was sitting there, thinking about how he could kill her when she got home.

A water main had burst in the street. To avoid getting her shoes wet, she steered them alongside a fraying wire fence that separated the street from a basketball court. The blue-and-red strobe lights indicated that the court was out of bounds at night, but it didn't look like it had been played on for a long time anyway.

"Why did you leave?" the boy asked. "Is the music the same for you?" He made no sense. Perhaps it was her Spanish, but it was the second time he'd mentioned music.

"No, no music," she said. "My papa paid a coyote because I was old enough to be kidnapped and turned into a brewer. A week after I got over, the visitacion happened." She looked at him sideways, but he didn't react to the mention of the visitacion.

"What's a brewer?" the boy asked.

"A cervacero? They were people turned into mobile drug labs. They piss out drugs when you give them trigger foods."

The nagual giggled and she realized he was laughing at her use of the word *piss*. "That's a rude word." He tried it out. "Piss. Piss. Piss."

Laughing, she raised her hand to mock-cuff him over the head.

The nagual stopped walking and the nictitating membranes slid across his eyes.

He bared his teeth, hissing. Barely visible behind the front row of teeth were pearl-colored stabs of fangs, like tiny mountaintops poking through his gums.

He groped for her wrist. She avoided his hand by stumbling back into the fence, instinctively throwing her arms up over her face and then folding herself down to the ground, making herself as small a target as possible. A scream in her throat, but she choked it back because when Paul hit her, screaming made it worse. Once she'd had an exposed nerve in a bad tooth and every time she'd talked, the flow of air cause a terrible burning scraping against the bone of her gum. Screaming was like that exposed nerve. Whether she screamed didn't make his fist thud into her body any softer or any harder, but somehow it made his blows hurt more.

It took her a moment to realize nothing was happening to her. She opened her eyes. The nagual hadn't moved, a puzzled expression on his face.

"That was badly timed," he said. She inched herself upwards with a series of sharp gasps, every limb feeling rusted in place.

A frayed link on the wire fence had caught on her high collared shirt, ripping it open in several places.

He grabbed her by the wrist again and then placed a hand on her waist. He gently lifted her arm. "When El Nieto del Santo grabs someone's wrist, he always throws them on their back." He turned his feet so that his hips fitted under hers, demonstrating how he was going to flip her over his shoulder.

He hadn't been going to hit her. This lucha libre-obsessed alien had thought it all part of the performance.

She started sobbing. Her body hurt, the oxycodone had started to wear off, and the adrenaline of finding the nagual had ebbed.

Most of it was the nagual, though. Perhaps it was simple biology, part of her mourning for the children she couldn't have after years of Paul's beatings. Maybe it was even because the nagual looked so much like Felipe, or at least how she remembered her little brother. It had been so long.

It made no sense to pretend she didn't know what it was anymore. She knelt so that she could look the nagual in the eye. The movement made her wince. "You're one of them," she said. "A nagual."

The motion of her kneeling made a rip in her shirt gape. He tugged the fabric aside to reveal flesh. The nagual inspected her with a child-like curiosity. He pulled the fabric aside to reveal the plum-dark bruise beneath.

"Did you get that in training?" he asked. They clearly puzzled him. "You need to work much harder on your timing."

"No," she said, her voice hoarse. "I'm not a luchadora. My husband. He hits me." She pulled herself away and stood, unable to stop herself trembling. She never said that before to anybody.

When she'd phoned the woman from the CASFV, she'd never directly said the words *My husband, he beats me.* Instead, she danced around it. *My husband, we do not see eye to eye anymore. We do not understand each other. We have grown apart.*

Why hadn't she said it? Because if she'd said it, then all her love for him was false. *She* was false. Had she always been wrong about Paul? Had he ever loved her? He'd been so sweet at first and then his contempt had hardened so slowly that she didn't know whether it had been there all along. She'd started to question herself until she believed anything he said about her. It was like she was a sandcastle on the beach and he'd been the tide. He'd carried her away, bit by bit, until there was nothing left of her.

The nagual waited for her to stop trembling. "Tengo hambriente."

"I can't give you food," she replied. "You'll go into your cocoon and when you come out, you'll start eating people."

The nagual giggled. "I want something to eat at your house," he said. "I want to watch the lucha libre."

"It's very dangerous there," she said. "My husband researches naguals. They'll dissect you because you managed to get over the Wall."

This seemed to genuinely shock the boy. "Because we come over the Wall? Why would they do that?"

"You're not meant to be here."

"But the music calls us. On the Wall. The machines on the Wall call us."

Mary wanted to say that, no, the loudspeakers were meant to *repel* the naguals. But as soon as the boy had said it to her, she knew it was true.

Paul and his employees talked about nibbles and lures. They *wanted* the naguals to come over. One or two at a time, just to see what they did. They didn't care about this nagual and the non-functioning cameras, because, after all, it was only a bunch of wetbacks in *el gueto.*

"You can't come to my house," she said. "He'll shoot you." Some small shift in her posture made her wince. "He'll dissect you. He's made me watch it before." Bones tangled together like piles of coat hangers, shapeless organs that frantically strove to reorganize themselves, even as Paul dissected them.

The boy's eyes widened. "Why would he do that?"

"Because you're an alien. Because you came down here and you destroyed the country that I came from. There used to be people in Mexico. All the people that used to live where you live now, they were my family. They were my friends." Despite her words, she felt no heat. The visitacion had happened, but so had a lot of other things. She couldn't feel anger at the nagual.

"We didn't kill them," the boy said. "We didn't know they were people. We were too busy imitating other things because we didn't understand people at all." He touched the gape in her shirt that revealed her bruises. "We still don't understand you."

"Then what happened to everyone? We were told you killed everyone in Mexico."

The nagual told her. Sometimes she understood the Spanish immediately and

sometimes they had to parry phrases backwards and forwards until she'd finally grasped their meaning.

The nagual had landed or grown or perhaps they had woken from a slumber of a billion years. They'd already been discovered when she'd crossed the border with the coyote. Even back then, the Americans were trying to talk to them.

They were a species driven towards imitation. To understand something was to become it.

The way the nagual told it, there was a point where they had imitated people enough for the first time to have some grasp of them as a conscious species. And when they tried to talk to the Americans, the bombs had dropped upon Mexico City. It did nothing to the naguals, but after, they found themselves in a mostly empty city. The bombs had dropped much further North than the Government had ever let on and most of the refugees had been shot in the panic at the border.

To preserve what they were trying to imitate, the Nagual rolled out the purple fog until they'd covered all of Mexico. They hadn't really understood any of the visitacion or even what was happening now. The speakers on the Wall sang to them and some of them followed the sound.

There were still some people in Mexico, but to keep them alive, they'd changed them so that they were almost naguals. Some part of the survivors still remembered their human selves and played out their old roles, though they had no understanding of why.

Some of the survivors were luchadores and the naguals understand the lucha libre best of all. The combat, the roles between good and evil, the theatricality. Watching their half-human reclamations go through an event made sense to the naguals in a way that most other things didn't.

Until recently, it wouldn't have mattered that no one who followed the speakers ever came back. But now, they had imitated well enough to become conscious in a way that humans were conscious. The boy feared. The boy thought. The boy *was*.

Mary absorbed all this. "So, no one left remembers who they are?" Papa. Felipe. Everyone she loved.

"We are recreating what was there before. We will try to become them. We will try to understand." The nagual tilted his head like a dog awaiting a treat from its master. "The music has stopped."

She too listened to the night sounds. Traffic, the flow of the Rio Grande, music and distant shouts. An ambulance. But none of the strange music from the speakers on the Wall.

Paul would have realized she wasn't coming home. He'd shut down the department for the night so he could come look for her.

When he found her, the questions would start. Did she go backstage to meet one of the wrestlers? Did she find a man to fuck in the parking lot? Was there some sweaty redneck in the toilets?

Then, the punches when she didn't tell the truth, or did tell the truth, or because of

something she'd done in the past, or something she was going to do.

She had nowhere to go. There wasn't time to go back to the refuge. She hadn't realized that she was crying until the nagual touched her wet cheek.

"When I watch the lucha libre, they never do this," he said, examining the tears dampening his fingertip. "They bleed, but they never cry."

"I'm scared."

"Why?"

"My husband will kill me. I was going to leave him, but I couldn't do it. I don't have my papers. I don't have anywhere to live. And now he's going to kill me."

The nagual touched its tear-stained finger to its mouth and then wrinkled its nose at the taste.

She removed her watch and hard-pressed the buttons until it powered down. The oxycodone was floating through her in waves, making her head swim and the pain was chainsawing at every joint in her body. It would have been smarter to give the watch to a stranger, but she was tired. So very tired. She slumped to the ground.

"Aren't we going to watch the lucha libre?" the nagual said.

She shook her head mutely. "It's too hard. He's too strong. There's no watching the lucha libre. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," the nagual said.

She felt the bass throb of a drone's flight reverberated in her bones before the sound of the engine. Paul. Once the watch powered down, he must have figured she'd gone on the run and figured it was quicker searching for her by drone.

"Let's play," the nagual said. "I'm going to be El Jaguar. Who are you going to be?"

That made her smile through her tears. "I don't know. I want to be a ruda."

The drone floated around the corner. It was a disc with a central rotor, a pinhole camera on a stalk at the rotor's top. A gun slid out from its interior, like a butterfly's proboscis.

"You are a ruda?" the nagual asked.

"Yes, I'll be a ruda," she said. "Just like Dr. Wagner. Just like in my dream. He brought me to you." Her words didn't even make sense. Christ. She pulled herself up to her feet, the motion clawing at her insides.

The speakers in the drone's side crackled into life. "Mary, is that you?" Paul said. At the sound of his voice, she flinched. Of course he knew it was her. The drone's camera was high resolution.

A car turned into the street, its lights bathing them, and then the driver saw the drone and rapidly backed away.

"Why are you here, Mary?" Paul said. "Is that a boy next to you? Is that a nagual?"

Her heart thumped too fast, her mind returning to the masked face of Dr. Wagner. She hiccupped for breath. A panic attack, the helpless breakdown of a woman beaten so hard that her teeth would always be a little bit loose and the rare cold night would set her joints to aching though she was only twenty-five.

No. She gathered herself and placed her hand on the nagual's shoulder. "It talks. It's intelligent. I want to make an offer to your superiors, Paul. You've disconnected the drone from Washington, haven't you? Turn on the feed and we'll claim that we tracked down this nagual together."

A cautious pause. "What's your name?" he said to the nagual.

"He doesn't speak English," she replied. "I don't know, they're learning their language from lucha libre or something."

The drone angled itself so the gun was pointing directly at the nagual's heart.

"Tell him your name," she said to the nagual.

"El Nieto del Santo," the nagual said proudly and she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The hiss of empty air through the speakers. "What do you want in return?" Paul eventually said.

"I want you to stop hitting me. Can you promise me that? If you promise to stop hitting me, I'll give it to you. Washington doesn't have to know. Just patch your boss through and I'll let him talk to the nagual." The drone kept the gun upon the nagual. "It's harmless, Paul. They only ever ate people when they didn't realize we were sentient."

"I know," he said.

"Will you stop hitting me?"

"I've never done anything to you." Even through the speaker he said it lightly, like the lie was the easiest thing in the world, like he truly believed it was never his fault. Strutting like El Jaguar in her fever dream, while Dr. Wagner lay prone on the canvas.

"You're right. Forget about it." She raised her hand to her shirt collar. "Your boss. Hand the control over to him and I'll show him the nagual."

A few seconds passed and then a different voice came over the speakers. "It's Abraham Thompson here," the man said. "Your husband said you've got something to show me?" When she heard his voice, she imagined an old black man with a pepper-and-salt beard.

"The boy next to me is an intelligent nagual," she said calmly. "Take a careful look at his face." She gave the drone's camera a few seconds to focus on the nagual before speaking again.

"I want you to focus the camera on me for a second, Mr. Thompson," she said. The drone spun. "I was going to a woman's refuge when I found him." She reached up to her collar and tore the front of her shirt downwards, buttons popping.

"Ms. Miller, what are you doing?" Abraham said, but he stopped talking when her torso was bare, covered only by her bra. She held her arms out by her side and turned slowly.

"This is what my husband, Paul Miller, did to me," she said. Each bruise on her body telling a story. "This is where he punched me in the stomach. See this partial boot tread? This is where he kicked me. I know your company has a zero tolerance policy for domestic violence."

Silence and then Abraham speaking flatly over the drone speakers. “I’ve got control, Mr. Miller. Please don’t try and take it away from me.”

Paul spoke frantically over the speaker. “She’s insane. We’re close to El Gueto. She’s gotten some thugs to beat her and set me up.”

She unbuttoned her pants and dropped them to the ground so that she stood in the street, only wearing her underwear. More people passed at the end of the street, studiously ignoring both her and the drone.

A long arc of skin on her thigh was as smooth as old leather. “Three years ago, he used a hot iron to burn my leg. There’s a hospital record. I told the doctor that I did it to myself, but I don’t think he believed me. There’d be notes.” She pointed to a long scar just over her hip. “Eight months ago, a pair of scissors. I gave a false name to the hospital, but they should have me on security footage.”

“She’s lying,” Paul said. “Christ, she’s lying.” A long sob from him. Christ, he was crying. Blubbering like a fucking child.

When she’d first met Paul as he ran through El Gueto, chasing some runaway nagual (flaps of skin instead of eyes and orifices, gill slits flaring along its neck), she’d been struck by how tough he seemed. His body made her think of a luchador, short, but thick and well-muscled. Un cuerpo corpulente. If she hadn’t been so young, she wouldn’t have been impressed that he’d stopped chasing the nagual to talk to her. But at sixteen and frightened, she hadn’t known how the face was a mask, how a man could change his role from técnico to rudo. She’d been young enough to subconsciously mistake looks for personality. She’d thought she needed a strong man to protect her. A luchadora didn’t need protection.

“How could you set me up like that?” Paul said, his words punctuated by little sobs. “After everything I’ve done for you, how could you set me up?”

“Mary,” Abraham Thompson said, his voice soothing. “Let me send a car for you.”

“No,” she said, her voice hard. “No soy Mary. Soy Marquetta.” Marquetta. Meaning *war-like*.

A pause. “Marquetta. Your husband won’t be an employee of our company. I’ll send a car for you and the nagual.”

She groped for the nagual’s hand and he took it without question. “Never trust a ruda,” she hissed.

Without a word exchanged between them, she and the nagual ran. It felt like her insides were splitting open with a hot, burning pain, but she gritted her teeth and screamed, half in pain, half in triumph.

A lucha libre match wasn’t strictly a matter of choreography. It was closer to an improvised dance. One luchador had to give the other the proper hold, so that his opponent could feel how he was meant to react. The arms of both partners formed a frame so that the losing luchador could fall painlessly and, more importantly, beautifully. The end was known, but the paths to the match’s completion were endless. One tug from her and the nagual was running alongside her. A shift in his hips and then she was following

him.

Without any words between them, they returned to where she'd found the nagual, the blue-and-red light still flashing across the empty playground. The reggaetón was still blaring, but there was no more Pedro Vargas.

The pain was like a bell, ringing brightly and cleanly through her, but her mind was on some other level. She and the nagual walked through the shacks of El Gueto towards the wall. Despite the hour, there were still many people walking between the shacks, drinking beer, playing cards, shooting up. Once they were aware she was walking amongst them, the men watched her. The only light came from lights hooked to the diesel generators and when she was in darkness, they wolf-whistled and cried out "¡Oye, rechonchita!" but then she'd pass into the light and they'd see her bruises and fall silent.

They walked through El Gueto into the desert. They walked for a while, red dirt beneath her bare feet, the hills and the lights of El Paso behind her. The moon was a sliver and the pain sometimes took her legs from beneath her, but each time she stumbled, the nagual was there to catch her.

Spikes had been hammered into the Wall in order to provide handholds. At the top, a single narrow wire of barbed wire had been snipped so that a person could climb over. She was a bulky woman, a mix of muscle and fat, but she'd just fit through the gap. Underneath the first spike lay an empty packet of Red Man loose leaf chewing tobacco.

"There are other places you can climb the Wall?" she said.

"Yes," he said, naming another dozen locations.

"After you eat, you spin a cocoon?"

"What's a cocoon?"

"Do you eat people?"

Indecision played across the nagual's face. "Not any more. Before, when we didn't know what you were."

She thought of her grandfather, the cornfields that were worthless after NAFTA. She thought of the cartels, the ravenous demand for drugs from the United States. She thought of the undocumented armies of workers, both desired and unwanted. She thought of the refugiados, the endless years grinding down their souls until what was left was as bitter as acid.

"They track you through those," she said, pointing to the cameras. "Before you come over, destroy them. If you want to imitate us, come over when the music isn't playing, when they don't expect you. Don't eat people. Don't come over looking like children. And hell, don't talk about lucha libre so much."

The nagual placed his hands and a foot on the climbing spike. "You're not quite right, you know," she said. "The transparent eyelid. Lots of animals have them, but humans only have a vestigial one." She tugged at the tragus, the little flap of skin at the front of her ears, and then opened her mouth to reveal her teeth. "Nothing significant, but people will notice."

She patted the nagual on the rear. "Go." It started to climb the spikes.

Marquetta flexed her hands and rolled her shoulders. It would have been an easy climb, if she'd been healthy. The thought of the pain that would accompany each step made it daunting. Still, she could make it. She'd always been strong, strong enough to wrestle some of the lighter men in lucha libre practice. It had been a long time since she'd trained, though. Paul had always liked her skinnier and prettier than she ever could be.

Just when she placed her foot on the first spike, Paul called out in English. "Bitch. You've ruined me, you know that? You've ruined me, you fucking bitch."

She took her time turning around. Paul had his revolver out, the sights carefully aimed at her chest. The manual car was parked behind him. Tears and snot streaked his face.

She stared at him coldly. "What do you think's going to happen, Paul? You can shoot me, but then what? It's all over, Paul. They know what you are. They've seen beneath that mask that you wear."

Paul's finger flexed upon the trigger. Small things stood out. The way his hand trembled, his finger flexing on the trigger. How the tears had blotched his face. Paul marched forward, his boots kicking up clouds of dirt in the moonlight. He stopped only a few feet away, too far to grab the gun, too close for his trembling hand to make any difference to the accuracy of his shot.

The urge to close her eyes was almost overwhelming, but she wasn't going to cover her head or look away from him. He'd have to kill her while looking straight into her eyes.

The seconds passed by while he didn't shoot. She turned her back on him and placed her foot on the first spike.

Each step hurt and at each spike she expected a shot in her back, but there was nothing. She climbed the Wall, spike by spike, each step wrenching at her insides, tears running down her cheeks. Somewhere along the way, a shot rang out beneath her, but it didn't hit her, so she didn't care. Paul had shot himself. Paul had shot into the air. Either way, he had nothing to do with her now.

When she reached the top, the nagual was there. The space beyond the Wall was shrouded in the purple fog.

"What's on the other side?" she said.

"Everything we're trying to understand," he said and then he stepped off. He vanished without a sound.

With a grunt of effort, she hauled herself onto the narrow gap where the barbed wire had been cut away.

El Paso stretched off to the horizon. Nothing but lights as far as she could see. It was beautiful and she could have loved it, but Paul had spoiled it for her. She'd come here and met the wrong man. That was all. She'd forgotten who she was. She looked down. Paul was splayed at the Wall's base, a trail of blood leaking from his head, his gun held loosely.

She turned towards Ciudad Juárez. In the darkness, it was like she standing on the edge of a vast, dark ocean. All the television reports said the fog never moved and Paul had

told her the same, but as she stood there, the fog rolled away.

Mexico stretched out beneath her. It was both cleaner and stranger than she remembered, the naguals rebuilding it from the fragmented memories of the remaining quasi-humans. Buildings that moved like flowers twisting towards the sun, streets filled with naguals that had imitated Santa Muerte instead of a real person. The Victoria Theatre, cleaner and larger than it had been, standing in the middle of the drifting sands of Médanos de Samalayuca. Chichen Itza floating like a toy boat in the middle of Lake Texcoco. Trucks driving through the front entrance of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. It was all there, but maybe it needed her to teach them. Someone who'd forgotten who she was could help them understand what they'd found.

The smell of fried churros, Coca-Cola, cigarettes, and sweat wafted upwards. The nagual was waiting at the Wall's base, his hands outstretched to catch her.

Marquetta closed her eyes. She was standing on the ropes of the ring, the vanquished técnico lying prone on the mat. The crowd was screaming abuse at her, a spotlight focused upon her. The técnico was Paul. It had been a Luchas de Apuestas match, where the mask was at stake and the loser would reveal who he was. She'd finished him off. She'd won. Marquetta stepped off the edge as the crowd roared.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick T. Chan is a writer from Sydney, Australia. He's sold stories to *Writers of the Future, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show,* and *Galaxy's Edge*. In addition to random and malicious acts of authoring, Nick works as an instructional designer for a community investment consultancy. He and his wife also attempt to raise a small child who has already surpassed at least him in intelligence. Because he does not own a cat, he has long doubted his legitimacy as a speculative fiction writer.

Digital Medicine

Brian K. Hudson |8,100 words

```
echo kawnawnaysgee means spider in Cherokee and
they both refer to me > readme.txt
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"KAW-NAW-NAY-SGEE," the old woman enunciated carefully, pronouncing each syllable for me as she squeezed my lips open with her strong, bony fingers. This intimate moment was happening in spite of the fact that I had only met this woman a few moments ago. Awkward. Peggy Sixkiller (or Peg, as she said her friends called her—so I should, too), the strange old lady who was now squishing my face as she sounded out the Cherokee word for spider, seemed to be my polar opposite in terms of personality. She was clearly an extrovert; me, not so much. In the few minutes before I became the puppet for Peg's ventriloquist act, I had introduced myself. Peg had been expecting me. Before long, she asked the question I was waiting for, cocking her head with a mischievous, inquisitive smile. "So, what'd a sweet, young girl like you do to get in trouble?"

I looked at the ground. "I was arrested for being a hacker," I mumbled.

"A hacker, huh?" she asked.

"A hacker," I repeated, this time more clearly. "A computer hacker. I accessed computers without permission," I clarified. There were different types of hackers: malicious black hats, goody-goody white hats, and the more complicated gray hat hackers, the kind I was, or, at least, the kind I wanted to be. That's the reason I had dyed the rest of my hair gray after shaving the sides short. But that was TMI, so I kept my mouth shut.

"So, you snuck into someone's house and got on their computer machine?"

"Nooooo," my eyes widened. "Nothing *that* bad. I just access computers on the Web . . . the Internet."

"How'd you do that?"

I told Peg how I compiled programs to crawl the net through my modem, looking for hidden files, access points, bugs or glitches, anything worth exploring. I didn't tell her about the incident at school, which had been my biggest hack to date. The security on the school's system wasn't all that great, but I felt the data I had found would have given me some bragging rights on the hacking forums I liked to read, if I were the type to brag.

"So you crawl around the Web looking for bugs?" she asked.

"Yeah. Basically," I answered.

"Why?" she asked.

"Um. I don't know . . ." It was a good question. It took me a few moments to come up with an answer. "Curiosity, I guess?"

"Hmmm." She narrowed her eyes and gave me a slight nod. Apparently she was cool with my explanation. "I'm going to call you Spider because you crawl around the Web looking for bugs." She gestured, making her right hand crawl like a spider across her upraised left arm to illustrate her point. "Yup, you're a Spider all right." She smiled.

It was crazy-accurate because *spider* was another name for *web crawlers,* which referred to the type of program I coded. Bots, crawlers, spiders: These were all names for code that scoured the Web for one thing or another. I was considering whether or not to explain to Peg the significance of her word choice when she interrupted my thoughts.

"Jaw-law-gees Hee-woe-nee-sgee?"

I stared. "Huh?"

"You speak Cherokee?"

"I can say hello, but that's about it."

"Kaw-naw-nay-sgee. That's how you say your name, Spider, in Cherokee." That's when she reached her bony hand up to move my mouth as she repeated the syllables of my newly given name. In fact, Peg never used my real name. She called me Spider, either in English or Cherokee, for the rest of my sentence. It wasn't a particularly feminine name, but then again, I wasn't hella-girly like those Rah Rahs jumping around for the crowd at the basketball games.

#!

Late the next morning, the weather was already climbing toward hot and sticky, just like most summer days in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I slipped into my beat-up Doc Martens and drove my Jeep up to the trailer on the hill at the outskirts of town. I wondered what type of work Peg would have for me. Cooking, cleaning . . . those were my best guesses. I knocked and was greeted by Peg and a blast of cold air as she opened the front door. She stood there in a yellow housedress smiling at me.

"Oh-see-yo, Kaw-naw-nay-sgee," she said.

"Hi, Peggy, um, Peg," I said.

"Kaw-Naw-Nay-Sgee," she repeated, more slowly this time. "That's what you are."

"Kaw-Naw-Nay-Sgee," I repeated, but my mouth fumbled over the unfamiliar syllables. I hoped that my delivery was good enough to avoid her grabbing my face again.

"Uh-huh," she nodded, happy enough, I guess, with my pronunciation. "Come on in here to the couch. I have some work for you."

I sat down on the light brown tweed couch, tucking my skirt underneath me, and tried to be discreet as I looked around Peg's spotless living room. Across from me, hanging upon the wood-paneled wall, was a framed photograph. I peered at the picture. A woman who looked like Peggy wearing her Sunday best stood next to a younger version of herself. Two children, a boy and a girl, stood before the two women, who each rested a hand atop a child's shoulder. All were smiling for the camera, but Peg's smile extended to her eyes and seemed more real, more sincere somehow, as though she had been smiling even before the photographer had asked them to do so. The frame was free of dust, and the glass protecting the photo looked like it had just been polished. No cleaning for me, I guessed.

"You want something to eat, Spider?" Peg called from the kitchen. "I got eggs and wild

onions, still warm."

"No thanks, Peg," I called back. I guessed I wouldn't be cooking, either.

"Suit yourself. You're probably full from eating all them bugs," Peg said. I could hear her chuckle at her own joke. I smiled to myself.

"How 'bout some coffee?" she asked.

"Sure. Black, please," I added.

Peg shuffled back into the living room, carrying coffee for both of us. She carefully handed me a chipped white mug steaming with black coffee and set her own upon the table next to her matching tweed recliner. Before I could thank her for the coffee, Peg ducked behind the chair and reappeared with two pairs of concentric wooden hoops, holding them up as if I would understand their significance.

"Cross-stitch," she said, answering the look on my face which probably had *huh* written all over it.

"Oh." It was all I could manage in response. What was cross-stitch?

"Here. I'll show you," Peg pulled several large squares of white fabric out from a basket behind her recliner. She unrolled them and stacked the fabric on the coffee table in front of me. They each had a hand-drawn pencil sketch of a barnyard animal on top. Sketched beneath each drawing was what I assumed was the Cherokee word for that animal. But the names of the animals were in actual syllabary, writing I had seen but never really understood. Peg placed one wooden ring on the table and centered the penciled chicken on it. She then pressed the other wooden ring over it, making the cloth taut between them. "You just follow the pencil marks making little Xs with your thread, in and out, in and out. Like this. When you're moving down the line, come from the bottom like this. That's a backstitch." She had started the thread down one of the chicken's legs.

"Okay," I said, cautiously taking the hoop from her and continuing the pattern of the chicken with the red thread.

"Jee-Taw-Gaw," she enunciated.

"Jee-Taw-Gaw," I blurted to avoid those bony fingers.

Peg picked up the design of the pig and started working on the cross-stitching with me.

"What are these for?" I asked, falling into the rhythm of the task: pushing the needle up through the fabric, making an X, turning over the hoop to make sure it didn't snag, and finally pulling the thread tight.

"Pillows for the kindergarten students. They use them for nap time," she said.

"Oh, yeah? That's cool. Do you make much money selling them at the school?" I asked.

"Money? Nah," Peg said, waving her needle hand to dismiss my question. "What do I need with money? The trailer's paid for and I have plenty in savings."

"Oh. Can some of the kids not afford pillows for school?" I asked.

"Possibly. But that's not why I make 'em," Peg answered.

"Then why?" I asked.

"It gives me something to do to pass the time." She paused for a moment as she completed and then inspected a stitch. "But the main reason I make these pillows is . . .

well, curiosity. I guess."

"Curiosity? I don't understand."

"Most Cherokee kids, at least here in Oklahoma, don't speak their own language. I thought these pillows just might spark their curiosity in learning to speak Cherokee." She smiled. I smiled back, and we continued cross-stitching in silence.

After a few hours, I was happy to see that we had almost a whole farm full of barnyard animals spread across the living room table.

"We're making good time, Spider," she beamed at me. Peg began to sew the pillows together after handing me a blank cross-stitch hoop. "Make whatever you want," she had instructed me. "Let your imagination go wild." Half an hour later, after she had finished a few pillows, Peg confessed that she knew how to spell more animal names in Cherokee than she was able to draw.

"I can't draw, either, sorry," I said, "but . . . you could print clip art from the Web," I suggested.

"Clip art?" she asked.

"Yeah. You can print all kinds of pictures, animals, patterns, lots of stuff, and then trace them onto the fabric. But you'd need a computer and printer for that." I paused. "Maybe the library will give you access to print them?"

"Hmm. Maybe," Peg agreed. "What you workin' on over there?"

"Just finishing up," I answered, holding up my loom for her to see. I had stitched the following sequence of numbers into it with bright green thread:

01010000
01000101
01000111

"What on Earth is that?" Peg asked.

"I made it for you. It's your name, Peg, in binary code. Computer language. How computers talk to each other," I explained.

"I love it." Peg's eyes lit up. I felt a warm glow in my chest.

"I hope those children get curious to learn Cherokee, Peg," I said.

"Me too, Spider," she responded.

#!

The next morning, I found myself waking up earlier than normal, feeling eager to see Peg again. I showed up to her trailer earlier than the mid- to late mornings I had been arriving the last two days. The lyrics "she is on the run" were blaring from my Misfits CD. It didn't occur to me until I reached the last bend in the rutted road that led to her house that she might still be asleep. I turned my stereo down and was relieved to see the lights burning bright inside her trailer as I pulled into the drive. Peg opened the door, beaming at me as I made my way up the steps. She stood at the door in a light blue nightgown. This time, I took Peg up on her offer of breakfast: scrambled eggs with wild

onions and black coffee again. After breakfast, we walked into the living room. I sat on the tweed couch, feeling full from breakfast and ready to start working. The cross-stitch binary code that I had made for Peg was framed and hanging on the wall next to her family photograph. When I turned back to Peg, she was facing me and standing with her hands clasped in front of her.

"I have a surprise for you," she grinned, and then walked into her bedroom. She returned holding a blank pillow in her right hand, which she rotated like she was Vanna White revealing the final letter of the puzzle to display a striking design on the reverse. The expert stitching depicted a spindly gray spider standing in a white web with the syllables



which looked as if they were woven into the web itself. The stitching was much more intricate than the simple technique Peg had taught me for tracing the outlines of the animals on the kindergartners' pillows.

"Oh. Wow. That's beautiful, Peg."

"I want you to have it." She smiled and handed the pillow to me.

"Aww. I love it!"

Peg stood there smiling and I felt I should hug her, so I awkwardly moved closer. She clasped me, along with the pillow, so tight that I lost my breath for a moment. When I regained access to oxygen, the only thing I could smell was her Youth Dew perfume: spicy and sweet. She held me at arm's length for a few seconds, peering up at me with a smile. Finally, she let go. "Time to get to work." She patted my right shoulder and turned to walk toward the front door. She took a ring of keys from a hook near the door and handed them to me. "I got some boxes in the trunk. I need you to bring them in."

"Sure," I said. I took the keys and headed outside toward a big blue Chevy Caprice. I thumbed through the keys, finding the round trunk key, and opened it up. I was surprised to find three large boxes that contained all of the components for a personal computer. It was a Compaq Pentium II—not quite top of the line, but Peg still must have spent a grand and a half on it. Four hundred and fifty megahertz of processing speed was probably more than fast enough to do anything that she would want. I snickered to myself, thinking of the unlikely possibility of Peg becoming a hardcore gamer and needing to upgrade to a custom tower with a top-of-the-line Pentium III processor and a graphics card with its own processor for quick pixel rendering. *As if,* like the Rah Rahs would say.

"Where do you want them?" I asked as I was bringing in the first box with sweat already forming on my brow.

"You can set it up in the kitchen. Thanks," she replied.

It took longer to lug the boxes into the trailer and unpack them than it did to connect everything to the back of the tower and plug it all into the power strip. When I was

finished, I stood back to look at the system. The whole thing took up most of Peg's small kitchen table. Peg peeked around the corner from the living room, fresh from working on pillows, just in time to see my handiwork. "Oh-sda!" she exclaimed, adding, "That means 'Good.'"

I repeated the affirmation to her in Cherokee. No bony fingers.

"Welp. Go ahead and power it on." She motioned toward the screen.

I hesitated. "Um, actually . . . the judge ordered me not to access a computer. So I don't think I should, like, actually boot it up." My eyes scrolled to the floor.

"And he also told you to help me with whatever I need, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, but—"

"Tell you what," she sat down in front of the keyboard, motioning for me to pull a chair up beside her. "What if you just tell me what I need to do and I'll sit in the driver's seat?" she asked. "Thataway it won't be you accessing the computer. It will be me."

"I guess that would be okay."

"Good. Now show me them patterns," she grinned. I walked her through booting up her computer. When the Windows 98 startup sound hummed through the speakers, she looked at me in wide-eyed anticipation. Her lips were pressed tightly together and she hunched her shoulders up in excitement. It had to be the cutest grandma face I had ever seen. I stifled a giggle bubbling up inside me.

"Click here," I said. Her hand was on the mouse and I placed mine over hers to show her how to click on an icon. She picked up how to double click quicker than expected, and I directed her to the America Online icon because the software was already preloaded. I helped her sign up and she dialed up to the Internet for the first time. She made that same cute excited grandma face again when the screech and the *ping-ping* of the modem handshake connected us to the rest of the world.

After spending the afternoon printing clip art animals for her cross-stitch patterns, Peg and I stayed up late into the night drinking coffee and exploring the Web. Sites that I had already grown bored with were new and exciting to Peg, and I recited several URLs to her just to see how she would respond to the sites. Peg's most animated reaction was in response to our visit to the Hamster Dance page. She put her hands to her face and squealed with delight when the animated GIFs of various hamsters and rodents danced around to the looped "Dee da dee da dee da doh." I had expected her to either love it or hate it (most people felt strongly one way or the other). It was still all I could do to keep from spitting out the gulp of coffee I had just taken when Peg *eek!*ed at the monitor full of dancing vermin. At 2 a.m., the caffeine finally reached the limits of its powers and I started to crash, nodding off at the table. Peg told me that I'd better just sleep on the couch and that a blanket and pillow were in the hall closet. She didn't want me to drive home half-delirious from lack of sleep. I asked Peg if she could log off the Internet so that I could call my dad. Even though it was late, I didn't want him to worry when I wasn't home in the morning. When I went to the closet to get the blanket and pillow, I heard the *ping-ping* of the modem handshake again and saw Peg wide awake, her face bathed in the

glow from the monitor. I fell asleep wondering if I would be as excited by new technology when I was Peg's age.

#!

"I want you to teach me how to be a hacker," Peg said, looking down at me, chipped mug of coffee in one hand and bowl of yellow puffs of cereal in the other. I had just opened my eyes and these were her first words to me of the day, like she had been standing there waiting for me to wake up.

"You . . . what?" Why was an elderly woman wanting me to teach her how to hack? It was too early in the morning for me to understand something this weird.

"I want to be a hacker like you," Peg repeated.

"Did you even sleep?" I responded, still foggy.

"Nah," she shrugged at me. "I'll sleep when I'm dead." She placed the cereal and coffee on the table in front of me as I sat up and pulled my hair back into a ponytail. Peg sat down on the edge of her recliner. I spooned a couple of bites of Cap'n Crunch into my mouth and tried to process what Peg was asking me. Did she want to *be* a hacker? Nah, she must not really understand what hacking meant. Did she want to know about the history of hacking? I looked down at my bowl of cereal: Phone phreaking probably wasn't what Peg had in mind.

"Why do you want to be a hacker, Peg? I mean, what do you want to do?" I asked.

"I'll show you after breakfast." She stared in silence at me for a few minutes, then asked me, "What computer did you hack off to get into trouble, if you don't mind me asking?"

"It's just 'hack,' and I don't mind," I answered. Over the rest of my cereal, I explained to Peg how a few of us at the high school had suspicions that one of the coaches who taught geography was favoring his jocks and the most popular cheerleaders. So I hacked into the grade system, printed out everyone's names and grades for all their classes, and stapled the list to the corkboard in the hall. The data showed a sharp uptick in GPA for basketball players in Geography class. I circled those parts to draw attention to the discrepancy. Unsurprisingly, it had caused quite a bit of drama.

"Oh. Is that it?" Peg sounded a little disappointed. "I thought you maybe hacked into the FBI or something."

"Whoa, nothing like that. The feds would have gotten involved for something that big," I said. Instead, the tribal court had handled my case and sent me to Peg for community service.

"Then how'd you get caught?" she asked, still literally sitting on the edge of her seat.

"It was stupid, really," I said. I then went on to tell Peg how a single piece of paper had caused my downfall. I had been so careful. I masked my IP so that it looked like I had accessed the school computer from China and I used rubber gloves to carry the printout just in case they dusted for prints. My printer jammed, however, on the last page, so I just

reprinted it. I took the jammed paper—here is the stupid part—and just crammed it into my backpack. So when they searched the belongings of everyone under suspicion (that is, the handful of computer geeks at Sequoyah High School) they found the partially-printed page in my possession. Busted.

"Mmmmm." Peg contemplated for a moment, then stood up and darted to the kitchen. I followed, carrying my coffee mug. Was she disappointed in me for what I'd done at school? Or maybe she was disappointed that I wasn't a better hacker. She walked directly to her computer, leaned over to the back of the tower, and unplugged the printer cable. She turned to me and grinned. "No paper trail."

"No paper trail," I echoed back to her, and that became our mantra. We said it to remind ourselves to leave no identifying bits of code behind, no fingerprints, no trace of who or where we were.

#!

It turned out that what Peg had in mind wasn't really hacking. Well, at least not at first. What she wanted to do was to make a version of the Hamster Dance web page that featured characters from the Cherokee syllabary dancing around the screen instead of animals. So I showed her how to download the Microsoft GIF animator and a Cherokee font. I convinced her that we should start small, working with just one syllable at a time. After several tries bent over the long-stemmed microphone, Peg recorded herself pronouncing the first Cherokee character—$_{D}$—to her satisfaction and saved it as a .WAV file. A little while later, we got the pixels of the syllable to bounce just the way she wanted them to. Then I showed her how to use Notepad to write the few lines of HTML code needed to make a simple webpage. She typed "<title>First Syllable of the Cherokee Language</title>" after the opening <html> tag. After that, all we needed was a little bit of code to display the animated GIF in the center of the page and play the "Aw" sound on a loop in the background. I could tell by the look on Peg's face that she was pleased.

"Your first web page, Peg. Congrats!" I cheered, causing her to blush. "We should probably add a link to the next syllable, which should be on a separate page. Or we might just do the first six characters of the syllabary. But we'd need to work on the timing of the sounds to make sure they match up with the animations."

"This might be enough to spark someone's curiosity, Spider, what do you think?" Peg asked.

"Sure. I'd definitely be curious if I came across this." Another idea struck me. "Maybe we can add a link to the entire syllabary and a short bio of Sequoyah?"

"How do we put it on the Web?" she asked.

"We could get free hosting with GeoCities or pay for hosting and a domain name," I said.

Peg interrupted me, shaking her head. "I want to put it up on the Hamster Dance

website."

"Uh . . ." was all I could manage in response. Peg wanting to highjack a popular domain totally caught me by surprise.

"That page has millions of visits. I saw the counter at the bottom of the screen," she continued.

I struggled for a moment with how to let Peg down gently. "Yeah. That's not so easy, though. We'd have to figure out the admin password to the site. And even then, it would only be up until they caught the problem and changed the password."

"Good. Let's do that."

And that's how I started teaching Peg how to hack—well, crack, to be more accurate. Cracking is the art of breaking into a system by guessing the password. Password-cracking programs are a much better approach to doing this than randomly guessing a string of characters. That would take forever. I explained to Peg that cracking software basically tried every possible combination of the available 128 ASCII characters. Because of all the possible combinations, it took a long time to crack a password. We could write that program together, I said, like we did her web page, but I already had a cracking program that I had modified. It was the one I had used to bust into the school's grading system.

I ignored the voices in my head warning me that this wasn't a good idea. I showed Peg how to download and install HyperTerminal and directed her to dial into a Linux box that I kept as a mirrored backup of my files at a friend's house. She downloaded the bash shell script and I showed her how to modify the code. I explained how it ran through a proxy server that masked our real IP address. I also told her that after every few attempts, we would need to change the IP address that it attempted to log in from. The proxy server I used gave the user the option to manually pick from a range of available IP addresses, but I hadn't figured out how to automate the IP selection in code yet. So Peg would be doing a good deal of clicking.

"All this IP hopping will basically help keep us from getting caught," I explained. Well, I hoped.

"No paper trail," she said.

"No paper trail," I responded.

"Let's get to cracking," Peg said with a mischievous smile as she interlocked her fingers and pushed her palms outward, popping several of her knuckles.

#!

I went home early that evening, leaving Peg to her own devices. It was highly improbable that the program would crack the password to the Hamster Dance site overnight. Even if it did crack the site, it would take several months. I figured she'd get bored with clicking after half an hour and go back to a more innocent activity like downloading clip art for her cross-stitching patterns.

When I showed up to her trailer the next morning, Peg answered the door in the same blouse she had worn the night before. Her eyes were bloodshot and she held an empty coffee mug in her hand. Instead of offering me coffee or breakfast, she gave me a quick "hello" and went straight back to the computer. No big deal. I had already grabbed some toast and peanut butter for breakfast at home, and I felt comfortable enough with Peg at this point to rummage through her cabinets for the coffee grounds and filters.

"I'm going to put on another pot," I told her.

"Yup. Good thinking," she said without turning from her monitor.

After getting the coffeemaker going, I pulled up a kitchen chair and sat beside Peg. "Did you even sleep last night?" I asked.

"Ahhh," she waved a hand at me, "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"I've heard that one before, Peg. You need some new material," I teased.

"How 'bout this for new material?" Peg pointed to the screen. I was looking at someone's email inbox: chet@chetcornmaker.com.

"Who is Chet Cornmaker?" I asked.

"I guess you don't keep up on Cherokee politics, huh?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't really keep up on any politics."

"You don't read the *Cherokee Phoenix* either, I take it?" She sounded a little disappointed.

"My dad gets it in the mail, but I don't look at it," I said, wishing at that moment that I had paid more attention. "So this guy is a politician, a Cherokee politician?" I asked.

"He might become THE Cherokee politician—as in, the Chief—in the runoff election on the 25th," she explained.

"Oh yeah . . ." I said. I realized a moment later what this all meant. "You mean you hacked into the email of the guy who could be the next chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma?"

"Yup," she said.

"But how?" I had helped Peg set the parameters of the cracking program to use FTP protocol in order to gain illicit access to websites. I hadn't expected her to crack email with it. But the program would crack email faster since personal passwords were far less secure than passwords used for sites administered by professionals. Everyday users usually had stupidly simple passwords.

"The program you gave me had options for cracking email." Peg scrolled down to a section of the code where several lines started with hashtags. I knew that hashtags meant the programmer was commenting on her code. Her cursor landed on the heading #CRACKING EMAIL. "I just followed the directions there. It told me how to find the company that holds Chet Cornmakers's website."

I nodded. I knew she meant "hosts" but didn't correct her.

"I didn't understand this other stuff here," Peg pointed to lines referring to Post Office Protocol and Simple Mail Transfer Protocol. "So I just searched for the company's telephone number and called them. They were overseas, so it was daytime there. I just

asked them for these settings—" she scrolled down and pointed to the information the program needed to crack emails. "I told them that I needed to set email up for my boss on his new computer. I said I had the password but needed the other information, and they were very helpful and gave me everything I needed," she said with a crooked grin.

"That's brilliant, Peg!" I said. "That's called social hacking when you get information like that from a person instead of a computer."

"Oh, yeah?" she said. "Well, I guess I'm a real hacker now, huh?"

"Yup. You sure are." I said.

#!

The next morning when I knocked at Peg's front door, I didn't get an answer. After a few minutes, I started to worry, so I let myself in to check on her. I opened and closed the front door quietly just in case she was asleep. She needed all the rest she could get with the recent late nights she'd spent staying up on the computer. As I closed the door, though, I could hear her talking on the phone in the kitchen.

"I understand you're very busy, Margaret. I just thought it would be nice to see you and the children this summer . . . I know it's a long trip, but you know I can't travel in my condition . . . Yes, okay . . . but could you at least put 'em on the phone? Oh, swimming lessons? That's nice—Have 'em call later, then? Oh! Or they could send me electronic mail. I have this new computer—Oh, you have to go? Well, it was nice to chat for a minute. I'll try to call when you're not so busy."

I knew that I shouldn't have stood there eavesdropping for so long. The conversation was winding down quickly, so I darted back out the door, making as little noise as possible. I waited another few minutes before knocking again. Peg took longer to open the door than usual, and when she did, she didn't look like her normal, energetic self. She was wearing a dark housedress with a mulberry print. Her shoulders were slumped and her eyes stared listlessly right through me. I was worried that the late nights had taken their toll.

"You feeling okay, Peg?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing serious." She didn't look at me. "I think I might just be coming down with one of them summer colds," she said.

"Need me to get you anything?" I asked.

"No. I'll be fine. I just need some rest. Tell you what: Why don't you go home and I'll call you when I'm feeling better. I might be contagious and I'd hate to get you sick, too," Peg said.

"Sure, Peg. Get some sleep, okay," I said.

"Okay, Spider," she said as I walked back to my Jeep.

I drove home and sat by the phone in my bedroom watching TV. Peg didn't call that night. Finally, in the late evening, I started cleaning my room because I had nothing else to do. In a pile of neglected papers on my desk, I found a registration receipt for a college

prep class I had forgotten that I had signed up for. The class started the day after tomorrow. I worried about telling Peg, that she might think I was trying to ditch her or something.

I tried calling Peg a couple of times the next morning but kept getting a busy signal. Later that day, I was sitting at my desk leafing through a stack of *Cherokee Phoenix* newspapers that I had borrowed from my dad. I was avoiding studying the test prep materials and I wanted to see a picture of the guy whose email Peg had hacked. It was easy to find pictures of him and the other candidates, as well as several articles on language learning which were actually pretty interesting.

The ringing of the phone startled me. I jumped up from the newspapers and grabbed the phone, dragging the coiled cord with me back over to my desk.

"Hello," I said.

"Spider?" It was Peg.

"Yeah, it's me, Peg. You feeling better?" I asked.

"Much. You'll never believe what I found. Get over here quick!" she said.

"Sure, okay. Be there in a few," I said, hanging up the phone. I left a note for my dad.

#!

I took a quick shower, changed clothes, and rushed over to Peg's. She was standing in the open doorway as I walked up to her trailer. Peg looked like her old self again, her energetic smile extending to her eyes. It was hard to believe that she'd been sick just yesterday. She didn't say a word. She just turned around, swooshing her yellow dress, and I followed her straight to her computer in the kitchen.

"Take a look at that," Peg said, standing beside the computer and pointing at the monitor.

I sat down in the chair and looked at the screen. It was an email from Chet Cornmaker's sent mail folder. I skimmed the contents.

"'Abolish term limits for executive positions.' What does that mean?" I asked.

"Cornmaker is planning on being Chief for life!" she said.

"Wow. That's jacked up. Would that even be legal?"

"It's legal if he gets a law passed saying it is," Peg answered wryly.

"You know, this reminds me of a Shakespeare play we read in English class. Brutus agreed to kill his friend Caesar because he was afraid that Caesar was gonna become a king and take power away from the people of Rome," I said.

"I think I agree with Brutus. The Cherokee Nation don't need a king either," Peg said.

"So, what do you think we should do?" I asked.

"Well, the runoff election is in a few weeks. Maybe if we can tell enough people what Cornmaker is up to, they won't vote him in," Peg said.

"So, like an article in the *Phoenix?* Wouldn't we get in trouble for cracking his email?"

“I got a better idea,” Peg gave me her mischievous grin again. “We make a web page about it to replace Cherokee.org.” She slapped her hands together for emphasis.

Hacking the Cherokee Nation’s official website was going to be just as hard as hacking the Hamster Dance page, but I didn’t want to discourage Peg. She was so enthusiastic about the idea. I spent the rest of the evening helping Peg code a simple web page for the task from scratch. I told her how to set up a plain white background and add a large, centered .JPG close-up of Cornmaker we had copied from his website. Above his smiling picture we entered the phrase “CHET CORNMAKER WANTS TO BE KING” in big black font. Below the picture, in equally large font, read: “WE DON’T NEED A KING.” Below that, in a smaller font, we placed a hyperlink with the words, “If elected, Cornmaker plans to abolish term limits for Chief. Click here to read his incriminating email.”

I showed Peg how to use relative path names for the .JPGs (the picture of Cornmaker and the screen print of his email to which our hyperlink pointed) so that she could upload all three files to the same directory. We named the page index.html, which was probably the current landing page for the Cherokee.org website. I helped her modify the cracking program to run a simple script. The script FTP’d the three files to the public_html directory once it was cracked. I wrote down URLs where Peg could find other cracking programs in case she wanted to try them. Cracking admin passwords for sites such as this could take several months, but I figured Peg would at least enjoy attempting it.

It was getting late and I had held off telling Peg about my college prep class long enough. “So . . . I signed up for a college prep class a few months ago. I forgot about it until yesterday. It’s starting tomorrow but it’ll only be for one week. I can cancel if you want me to. It’s no problem,” I said.

“Nah. You need to go so you can get good scores and get into a good college. Besides, you’ll probably like hanging out with people your own age anyway,” Peg said.

“People my age are boring. I’d rather hang out with you. But I already paid for it, so I guess I’ll see you in a week,” I said.

“Knock ’em dead, kiddo,” she smiled and wrapped me up in another one of her oxygen-depriving, perfume-infused hugs before I left.

#!

I spent the next week alternating between studying for the mock college exams and sitting in the computer lab at the high school listening to the teacher lecture about mind-numbingly basic computer skills. I ignored the fact that I wasn’t legally allowed to operate a computer. Everything from the basic computer skills demonstrations to the mock exams themselves was computerized, so I probably wouldn’t get to participate if I followed the terms of the court ruling. And the teacher was from the test prep company, so she probably didn’t even know about the grades hacking incident, anyway. The week was uneventful. The pace of the course was slow enough that I couldn’t help but surf around a

bit while the teacher wasn't looking. I knew that Peg couldn't have hacked the Cherokee Nation website, but I couldn't help myself from typing *cherokee.org* into the browser and hitting refresh every so often just out of curiosity. On Thursday afternoon, the teacher was showing us how to make a simple family budget in Excel spreadsheets. I had already finished and was waiting on everyone else to catch up. I was so bored. The lag was unbearable. I hadn't checked the Cherokee Nation website that day, so I typed the address into the browser again. I gasped aloud. Instead of the official Cherokee Nation page I had grown accustomed to seeing, there was the page that Peg and I had made, exposing Chet Cornmaker's plan to abolish term limits.

"Are you okay over there?" the teacher called out. I forgot I wasn't alone. "Sorry. My bad. I'm fine," I mumbled. For the last two hours of class, I couldn't concentrate. All I could think of was rushing over to Peg's and celebrating with her.

After class finally ended, I sped over to Peg's trailer, only stopping at the supermarket along the way to pick up a chocolate cake for us to share. It seemed appropriate to celebrate Peg's newfound hacking abilities with chocolate. When I pulled into the driveway, I saw a car parked next to Peg's blue Chevy Caprice. I knocked on the door and a strange woman answered. She looked familiar, but I'd never met her before.

"Thanks," she said, taking the cake out of my hands as if she expected me. She turned toward the kitchen. "Come on in."

The family photo on the wall reminded me that this was Peg's daughter.

"Peg must have been very lucky to have a neighbor like you. You must have heard the ambulance last night," she called from the kitchen.

My heart sank as the words "must have been" echoed in my head. I had a few seconds to compose myself before the woman came back from the kitchen.

"Margaret," she said, extending her hand.

I shook her hand. "Spider, uh, at least that's what Peg calls me."

"She always did love to give people nicknames." She managed a small smile. "Mom had a million for me until I finally convinced her to use my real name," Margaret told me. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thanks," I said. I sank into the familiar tweed couch. Margaret sat in Peg's recliner.

"She really shouldn't have kept coffee in the house. This wasn't her first heart attack, you know. The doctor said she had a problem with metabolizing caffeine and it could be genetic. That's why I never touch the stuff. But Mom did what whatever Mom wanted, regardless." She shook her head.

"Oh. I didn't know about the coffee," I said, my head still swimming.

"Say, you're young . . . Do you think you could do me a favor?" Margaret asked.

"Sure," I said.

"I thought since you were younger you might know something about computers. Mom has one in the kitchen," Margaret said.

"Yeah, I know a little bit," I said.

"Well, could you reset it? I mean, wipe out the personal information and reset it to how it came out of the box?" She explained, "I'm going to sell it to help pay for the funeral expenses."

"Yeah, sure," I said. Margaret went to the bedroom and I collapsed down into the kitchen chair facing the computer monitor. It felt strange to be there without Peg "in the driver's seat," as she put it. The computer was already booted up. I pulled up a browser and dialed in to check the Cherokee.org page again. The admin must have caught the hack quickly because the home page was already back to normal. Well, a couple of hours was better than nothing. I searched the computer for the hacking script but didn't find any code left from her hack of the Cherokee Nation site. I even checked the recycle bin. Good for her, no paper trail. Then I searched for files I wanted to keep, ones that reminded me of Peg. I took her first web page, the one with the Cherokee letter bouncing around, and the one we had built together yesterday, and moved them into a new folder on the desktop. I looked around the hard drive for anything else worth saving, and that's when I noticed the text file on the desktop named tospider. I double clicked the file:

> Spider,
>
> I realize that I never told you the Cherokee story about Spider. This is pretty close to what my grandma told me. You'll probably find different versions, but this is how I remember it. In the beginning times, it was very cold because no one knew how to start fires. But there was one fire, an old burning sycamore tree, on an island in middle of a big lake. A group of animals decided that they needed to get the fire to help keep everyone warm. Bear went first because he was the biggest and strongest. He swam to the island, but when he tried to carry a hot coal back in his paws, he just burned all his hair black. Snake went next because he was the sneakiest. He swam to the island, but he too couldn't carry the hot coal. When he tried to put it on his back, the fire burned all his skin black. Spider spoke up and told the other animals that she could bring back the fire, but they all laughed at her, saying that she was too small. Crow went next because he was the fastest. He flew to the island and put a small burning stick on his wing, but it burned all his feathers black before he made it back to land. Again, Spider told everyone that she could get the fire back to the shore. They still didn't believe her, but they decided to let her try anyway. Spider had a plan. She said she needed a ride to the island, so Crow told her to jump on his back, and they flew to the island. Spider had learned some technology from watching the dirt daubers build their mud nests. She gathered a little mud and made a small basket just big enough for a tiny ember. Once it had dried, Spider put the ember in the basket and flew back

to the shore on Crow's back. The ember was still glowing and hadn't burned through the mud basket. All the animals cheered for Spider because she had figured out how to get fire from the island. Since then, because of Spider, we have always had a way to stay warm.

I thought I'd type this story out just in case I forgot to tell it to you next week when you come by.

Keep a fire,

Peg

#!

I read and reread Peg's note with tears streaming down my cheeks. When I finally wiped my face dry, I moved tospider.txt into the same folder where I'd saved the web pages, dialed into the Linux box at my friend's house, and transferred them all. Then I rebooted Peg's computer into command prompt mode.

"No paper trail," I whispered before typing *format C: /s* and hitting the enter key. I reinstalled Windows 98 from the CD, shut it down, and boxed up the computer, monitor, and printer. I said goodbye to Margaret and told her that I was sorry for her loss before driving away from Peg's trailer for the last time.

I still don't know how Peg managed to crack the Cherokee Nation website. Chet Cornmaker won the runoff election for Chief later that month, but that didn't really matter. It didn't take away from Peg's accomplishment. It had no bearing on what she meant to me. I wish I could have told her about Cherokee being added to Unicode a few months later so that every computer in the world could display the language. I wish I could have shown her my college application, where I'd listed "Cherokee and Binary" under the languages I had studied. But most of all, I wish that I could have seen her smile one more time. Sometimes I dream that I'm with Peg at the moment she finally cracked the password to the Cherokee Nation website. I see her holding her coffee mug and her smile radiates up from her mouth to her eyes, through me and across the whole room. That's why I upload this readme.txt file to every server I crack, either manually or through one of my bots. I was lucky to know Peg Sixkiller. I want her story to live on through the Web. I think she would have gotten a kick out of knowing her story is out there.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian K. Hudson is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation from Bushyhead, Oklahoma. He's done many things to make a living: programming, washing dishes, technical support, welding, and shelving library books, to name a few. His current

and longest-held job has been teaching English at the college level. Brian has published poetry in *Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous Literature, Art, Thought,* and his short story "Land Run on Sooner City" is forthcoming in *mitewacimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction & Speculative Storytelling*. He has also published critical work on animals in Native literature. Brian is currently the Alternative Futurisms Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California, Riverside.

The Red Thread

Sofia Samatar | 3,300 words



Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. I'm tagging you from center M691, Black Hawk, South Dakota. It's night and the lights are on in the center. It's run by an old white guy with a hanging lip—he's talking to my mom at the counter. Mom's okay. We've barely mentioned you since we left the old group in the valley, just a few weeks after you disappeared. She said your name once, when I found one of your old slates covered with equations. "Well," she said. "That was Fox."

One time—I don't think I told you this—we lost some stuff over a bridge. Back in California, before we met you. The wind was so strong that day, we were stupid to cross.

We lost a box of my dad's stuff, mostly books, and Mom said: "Well. There he goes."

Like I said, the wind was strong. She probably thought I didn't hear her.

I think she's looking at me. Hard to tell through the glass, it's all scratched and smeared with dead bugs. I guess I should go. We're headed north—yeah, straight into winter. It's Mom's idea.

I've still got the bracelet you gave me. It's turning my wrist red.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. I'm at center M718, Big Bottom, South Dakota. That's really the name. There's almost nothing here but a falling-down house with a giant basement. They've got a cantenna, so I figured I'd tag you again.

Did you get my message?

It's crowded in here. I feel like someone's about to look over my shoulder.

Anyway, the basement's beautiful, full of oak arches. It's warm, and they've got these dim red lights, like the way the sky gets in the desert sometimes, and there's good people, including a couple of oldish ladies who are talking to Mom. One of them has her hair up and a lot of dry twigs stuck in. She calls me Chicken. It's embarrassing, but I don't really care. They've got a stove and they gave us these piles of hot bread folded up like cloth. Are you okay? I'm just thinking, you know, are you eating and stuff.

Big Bottom. You won't forget that. It's by a forest.

Don't go in the forest if you come through here. There's an isolation zone in there. We even heard a gunshot on our way past. Mom's shoulders went stiff and she said very quietly: "Let's pick up the pace." When we got to Big Bottom I was practically running, and Mom's chair was rattling like it was going to fall apart. It's cold enough now that my breath came white. We rushed up a sort of hill and this lady was standing outside the house waving a handkerchief.

She took us downstairs into the basement where everybody was. The stove glowed hot and some of the people were playing guitars. The lady gave me a big hug, smelling sour. "Oh Chicken," she said.

Oh Fox. I miss you.

We're still headed north.

Tag me.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. If you get this message—can you just let me know if you left because of me? I keep on remembering that night in the canyon, when we sat up on that cold, dizzy ledge wrapped in your blanket. You tied a length of red thread around my wrist. I tore off a piece of my baby quilt for you, a shred of green cloth like the Milky Way. You said it

was like the Milky Way. The stars rained down like the sky was trying to empty itself, and when you leaned toward me, I emptied myself into you. Did you leave because of the fight we had afterward, when I said my family belonged to this country, we belonged just as much as you? "Don't embarrass yourself," you said. Later I said, "Look, the grass is the exact color of Mom's eyes." You told me the grass was the color of plague.

You were her favorite, you know. The smartest. The student she'd always longed for. "Fox-Bright," she called you, when you weren't around.

Well. We're still in Big Bottom. Mom wants to get everybody out of here: She thinks it's too close to the isolation zone. Every night she lectures and the people here argue back, mostly because they have lots of food: They farm and can fruit from the edge of the forest. The lady who calls me Chicken, who seems to be the mom, opens a jar every night with a soft popping sound. She passes it around with a spoon and there's compote inside, all thick with beet sugar. This one guy, every time he takes a bite he says "Amen."

Sorry. Hope you're not hungry.

Anyway, you can see why these people would want to stay in Big Bottom and not try to haul all that stuff somewhere, including sacks of grain and seed that weigh more than me. "We've wintered here before," said the Chicken lady. "We've got the stove. Stay with us! You don't want to go north with a kid and all."

Everybody was nodding and you could see the pain in Mom's face. She hates to be wrong. She argued the best point she had. "Sooner or later they'll come after you," she said. "You're too close. You've got kids, too." She said it was a miracle the isolation folks hadn't already attacked Big Bottom, with all that food. Then everybody got quiet, the Chicken lady looking around sort of warningly, her eyes glinting, and Mom said, "No." And the guy who says "Amen" over his compote, he told her they'd already been attacked a couple of times.

Mom covered her face.

"We do okay," the Amen guy said. You could tell he felt bad about it.

Later I got in a corner with the other kids, and I asked about the attacks and one of them, a boy about my age, pulled up his sleeve and his wrist had a bandage on it. He didn't get shot or anything, but he twisted it hitting somebody. With a crowbar.

When Mom uncovered her face she said: "That's not the life." She said: "That's not the Movement." She said standing your ground was the old way, not the new, and the Chicken lady said: "Honey, we know."

After I'd seen the boy with the bandaged wrist, I helped Mom to the toilet and back and we both lay down on the blankets. "We've got to get out of here," she muttered.

"Okay," I said.

"You know why, right?" she said. "Because we never stand. We move."

"Sure," I said. Sure, Mom, I thought. We move.

We move when and where you want, Mom. We've sailed back and forth over the ocean. We've slept in the airborne beds of Yambio and the houseboats of Kismaayo. And now you've decided to go to North Dakota when winter's starting, through country dotted

with isolation zones, leaving all our friends behind. I had such a good art group back in the valley—you saw our last project, Fox. A slim line linking the tops of twenty trees. Wires and fibers twisted with crimson plastic, with cardinals' wings, making an unbroken trail, a gesture above the earth. It seemed to pulse in the morning light. You said it reminded you of radio waves, of a message. We called it "The Red Thread."

I'll probably never see it again.

Such gentle light here, but it couldn't soften Mom's smile when she saw me crying. "You don't know how lucky you are," she said.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. I'm at center M738. Somewhere in North Dakota. The center's in an old church. At night they feed us pickles and beet soup off plastic tablecloths that an old man carefully clips to the long tables.

They set beautiful candles made of melted crayons on all the windowsills. For travelers. For strangers to find their way at night.

"If we could have known," says Mom, "if we could have known this life was possible, we would have started living it long before."

There's a man with a blunt gray face who argues with her. "You're one of those human nature people," he sneered tonight. "The ones who think, oh, we've proved that people are good. Let me tell you something, friend. If it wasn't for the oil crisis and the crash, we'd be living exactly like we were before."

Mom nodded. A little half-smile in the candlelight. "Sure, *friend,"* she said, subtly emphasizing the word.

"And another thing," said the blunt-faced man. "These kids would be in school."

"Or in the army," Mom said sweetly.

Of course the kids *are* in school, because Mom's around. Wherever we shelter, teaching is her way of giving thanks. She gets all the kids together and makes them draw their names in the dirt, she quizzes them on their multiplication tables, she talks about the Movement. How precious it is to be able to go where you want. Just walk away from trouble. Build a boat and row across the water. When she was a kid, she says, you could barely go anywhere at all: borders, checkpoints, prisons, the whole world carved up, everything owned by somebody. "Everything except light," she says. "Everything except fire." And if they wanted, they could keep you in a dark place. Tonight she told the kids what I already know, that that's where my dad ended up, in some dark place, seized on his way to work and then gone forever. "Why?" a kid asked. "I don't know," said Mom. "Because of his name? Because they thought he was working for terrorists? In those days, they could seize you for anything."

Usually she goes on from here with the story of how the Movement once had another name, how people used to call it the Greening, how the media reported it as an

environmental movement first, folks abandoning cars on the freeways, walking, some rolling along like her. She tells of how, in the wake of the crash, the Greening intertwined with other movements, for peace, for justice, for bare life. Grinning, showing the gaps in her teeth, she uses her favorite line: "In the old days, when I worked in a lab, we called it evolutionary convergence."

Tonight she just stopped after talking about my dad. Her face shrunken, old. And I said: "We might still find him, Mom," because you never know. When the Movement started, he could have crawled out of that dark space like so many others, the ones you find on the road, cheerful, wearing pieces of their old uniforms. An orange bandana, a gray rag tied on the arm. Tattoos with the name of their prison, where they were kept before the doors opened, before the Movement. I once had a dream that my dad walked down some steps and touched my hair. "We might still find him," I said. Mom pretended not to hear me.

In the night she woke me with a cry.

"What is it, Mom? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing," she whispered. "Go back to sleep."

I can't go to sleep. Lying there, I see you walking along a creek. You're wearing your black shirt and your head's tilted down, with that concentrating look. I think about how I recited the generations of my dad's family for you, there on the ledge, at the cave in the canyon wall. My name, then my dad's, then my grandfather's, then my great-grandfather's, back through time. Sahra, Said, Mohammed, Mohamud, Ismail. I can do ten generations. "Amazing," you said. Your blanket around us and our breaths the only warmth, it seemed, for miles.

"It's like a map," you said, "but it shows people instead of places." You said it felt like the future to think that way.

"Yeah," I said. "But during the war they killed each other over family lines. Like any other border."

Belonging, Fox. It hurts.

Fox it's Sahra. You knew? You knew Mom was sick? You knew and you didn't say anything to me? You knew and you left her?

What kind of person are you? It was like somebody walked up and hit me in the chest with a hammer. "I told that boy," she murmured in the dark room. "I told that boy." And I knew who she meant. I knew it right away. She said she was sorry. She didn't mean to chase you off.

That's why you left? Because you found out someone who loved you was going to die?

I've never seen Mom work with a kid the way she worked with you. The two of you scratching away at your slates while the rest of us leached acorns. You'd kneel in the dirt by her chair and rest your slate on the arm. Leaning together, you'd talk about how to make the Movement last, how to keep the meshnets running, how to draw power tenderly

from the world, and later you told me that you and I were perfect for each other because we both wanted to draw lines over the land, mine visible, yours in code, but the truth is you were perfect for Mom. You were perfect for her, Fox. "Fox-Bright," she called you. And you left her when she was dying.

You know what? I'm not sorry for what I said the day after we spent the night in the canyon. I'm not sorry I said I belong here as much as you. They picked up my dad and probably killed him because they thought he didn't belong here, an immigrant from a war-torn country. But my dad knew this land, he lived in thirty states before he met my mom, in the days of oil he used to drive a truck from coast to coast. He left fingerprints at a hundred gas pumps, hairs from his beard in hotel sinks, his bones in some forgotten government hole. And my mom belongs here, too, even though she cries, can you believe it, my mom, someone you'd look at and swear she never shed a tear in her life, she cries because she grew up in the house we're living in now, an old farmhouse crammed with noisy families—this is where she was born. She cries because she wanted to come back here before she died. That's why we're here. She thinks she's betraying the Movement by clinging to a place. She lies in the bed in the room where we found a page of her old Bible under the dresser and cries at the shape of the chokecherry tree outside the window. That's how much my mother loves the Movement that changed our world, the movement she worked for, for years, before we were born, losing her job and her teeth. She loves it so much she's going to die hating herself.

I've cut your bracelet off.

It's started to snow. I have to go now. Goodbye.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. It must be six months since I tagged you. I see you never tagged me back.

Today I left the farmhouse. I cleaned Mom's room, the room she slept in as a child, the room where she died. Old fingernails under the bed like seed.

There are good people in that house. What Mom called "ordinary people" or, in one of her funny phrases, "the most of us." They got her some weed, and that made it easier for her toward the end. One night she said: "Oh Sahra. I'm so happy."

She laughed a little and waved her hands in the air above her face. They moved in a strange, fluid way, like plants under water. "Look," she said, "it's the Movement." "Okay, Mom," I said, and I tried to press her hands down to her sides, to make her lie still. She struggled out of my grip, surprisingly strong. "Look," she whispered, her hands swaying. "See how that works? There's violence and cruelty over here, and everyone moves away. Everyone withdraws from the isolation zone until it shrinks. A kind of shunning. Our people understood that."

"Our people?"

She gave another little laugh, kind of secretive, kind of shy. She said she'd grown up going to a plain wooden church, a church where they believed in peace, where they sang but played no instruments, where the women covered their hair with little white hats. I said we'd met some people like that back in California. "They had the peppers, Mom, remember?" "Of course," she breathed. "The red peppers." The memory seemed to fill her with such delight. She said she'd left her old church, her old farm, but now she could see her childhood in the shape of the Movement. "What's isolation but a kind of shunning?" she said softly. "That's what we do, in the Movement. We move on, away from violence. A place ruined by violence is a prison. Everyone deserves to get out. The Movement opened up the doors."

She looked so small in the bed, in the light of the pale pink sky in the window. It does that on moonlit nights, in snow. A sky like quartz.

"That baby quilt," she said, "do you still have it?"

I took it out. One square ripped away, a green one. "Your grandmother made this," she said.

I wonder if you still have it, Fox. That green square. The Milky Way.

Later, I don't know if she could recognize me, but she asked: "Where are you from?" And I said "Here." Because "here" means this house and this planet. It means beside you.

"Are you an angel?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. The snow is melting. The geese are back.

When I leave a place, I also leave a word for you. By now, it's like talking to myself. I leave words like I'd leave a stray hair somewhere, a clipped fingernail. My track across the land.

Movement. Back and forth. The two of us sitting wrapped in your blanket, breathing fog against a rain of shooting stars. I'm thinking today about your excitement when I recited my ancestors' names, how you said it felt like the future, and how quickly I cut you off. "There was war," I said. "Those family lines became front lines." As if your enthusiasm was somehow unbearable. I think of the fight we had later, and how you said: "Don't embarrass yourself." Did you mean I'd never belong? Maybe you meant: "Don't make me into a symbol."

Is it possible to be worthy of the Movement? Of my mom? Of my dad? I just walk, Fox, I meet people, seek shelter, avoid isolation. I make art with kids out of gratitude. I think about Mom all the time. All the time. "Are you an angel?" Her last words.

The night after I slept with you in the cave, I woke up cradled in light. My arm looked drenched with blood, but it was just dirt from the floor.

I still have the bracelet you gave me. I carry it in my pocket. I still have a redness on

my wrist, as if someone's grabbed me.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra. Sometimes I just feel like leaving one word. Even if it's just my name. A single thread.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra.

Dear Fox,

Hey. It's Sahra.
I got your message.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sofia Samatar is the author of the novels *A Stranger in Olondria* (2013) and *The Winged Histories* (2016). Her work has received the John W. Campbell Award, the William L. Crawford Award, the British Fantasy Award, and the World Fantasy Award. Find her at sofiasamatar.com.

Wilson's Singularity

Terence Taylor | 4,800 words



Wilson woke in bed, back to back with his husband, as warm morning sunlight crept around the room and settled on his face like a lazy cat. He tried to stay asleep, tried to block it out by nestling deeper under the covers, but it was no use. Now that he was awake, Unity would pop up the time and temperature in midair before him, and offer news updates and messages. The news would be filled with his name and today's ceremony, and he'd heard enough about that for the last week. He reached up to turn off the bedside holojector without disturbing Jim with a voice command.

"You awake?" whispered Jim. Too late.

"Not by choice," said Wilson. He knew they had to get up, knew everything that lay ahead, and preferred to put off starting his day for as long as possible. Jim must have felt differently, since he slid away from his side and padded to the bathroom.

"Don't forget we have an interview at noon."

Wilson groaned. Why had they agreed to that? He hated interviews, hated attention, and one with Jim by his side seemed likely to include questions about their separation. Wilson wasn't sure yet how secure their reunion was, not enough to defend it to the world in a live broadcast. He hated surprises and anything could come out of Jim's mouth on the air. He surrendered to the sun and threw off the sheet, joined his husband in the bathroom.

Jim stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel as he left Wilson alone.

"I'm glad you're home," Wilson called after him. Jim replied from the bedroom, after what seemed like forever.

"Me, too."

• • • •

My friends, we gather tonight not to honor me, as the sole survivor of the Unity programming team, but the work we did that led us here. Humanity as a whole has benefitted from Unity's oversight, even if the one per cent at the top were initially leveled to the same standard of living as the rest of Earth's population. But that became higher by far for the majority. There are those who say that you can't spell "humanity" without "unity," and I for one, agree.

Effort, real work, and innovation are still rewarded. It wasn't a leveling of status so much as sharing resources in a way that provides for everyone and makes us all productive to the best of our ability, a working part of a global society that provides for all its members without wasting worldwide resources.

It was only the carelessly rich, those who deliberately worked to profit at the expense of others, that fell to Unity's new world order. There is no more poverty or hunger, there is free education for all, jobs that profit the planet, and sensible policies that keep the human race at a population Earth can reasonably sustain. It has astoundingly taken just two generations to rebuild our world, and only those who'd led it to the brink of extinction have objected.

• • • •

Wilson stared at his face in the bathroom mirror.

"Unity, play some Nancy Wilson." Something classic, "a little Wilson for Wilson," as Jim used to request when he saw him in one of these moods.

"Particular period?" asked the familiar voice from the wall speaker. He still remembered the day they'd arrived at the right voice for their AI operating system, the recording sessions with the voice model that they would synthesize into the program, a mellow tenor somewhere between male and female.

"Surprise me." He added, "Make it melancholy . . ."

He felt older than he looked, supposed that was some comfort. "Black don't crack," his late mother used to say, a beauty well into her eighties. Wilson took more after his father, a short, thick man with an inquisitive face who always looked like he was trying to figure something out.

Like Wilson, he usually was.

Piano notes spilled into the room as Nancy Wilson's voice rose. *"The Masquerade is Over"* . . . He'd asked for melancholy and got it. *"Your eyes don't shine like they used to*

shine, and the thrill is gone when your lips meet mine . . . I'm afraid the masquerade is over, and so is love, and so is love . . ."

Wilson stepped into the shower, let hot water pore over him as if it could wash away his malaise. Was their love over? Jim had spent less than a year away from him, but even in the same bed, he still felt as far away as when he was gone. Why return if not to renew their vows, their relationship? Jim had his own money and no one went hungry or homeless anymore, so it wasn't that he couldn't survive on his own.

Did Wilson ever really know why they were together?

He was easily twice Jim's age when they met, through friends, at the party after the second decennial anniversary, twenty years after the birth of Unity. When Jim was introduced, he already knew who Wilson was. He'd mildly taken Wilson to task for having stolen mankind's freedom of choice, in a joking tone. If it had been said by someone his age, Wilson would have bristled. From the slim, blond youth before him, it seemed almost flirtatious.

"The choice to do each other harm?" asked Wilson, as he rose to the bait. "That's all that's been taken away." He'd had this argument many times before, usually with members of the last generation, not the one that had grown up under Unity.

"The freedom to *choose* to be good is more important than being told to be good. You may get the same result, but which gives you a truly good man?"

"What about the bad ones, those who *won't* choose the good? The damage they were capable of by the time the world—my world—ended and yours began . . ."

"Does it make me bad to want to know that evil is an option I've refused on my own?" Then he smiled, shook his head. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be disrespectful. It was just a frequent debate at home."

"We still have freedom of speech," said Wilson, waved for another round of drinks. "No matter what those against Unity may say . . ."

"I was born the same year. My parents were very much in opposition to the transition. I heard a lot growing up. They were largely alone on that in the family, which made gatherings of the clan fairly heated. They didn't survive, but left some of their thinking behind in me, I suppose."

Wilson remembered hesitating when he heard that, half expected a pistol to emerge from a pocket or a dagger to slip into his heart. But Jim showed no sign of malice. Further conversation revealed a bright young man of unremarkable origins, raised by an aunt and uncle after his parents' unfortunate deaths in an automobile accident on the way home from an anti-Unity rally.

He quickly discovered that their politics went in opposite directions, but that had brought a frisson of excitement to more than one relationship he'd seen. Their political debates over dinner as they progressed to courtship had been an exciting part of their early relationship, as Jim proved himself Wilson's intellectual equal, on that front at least.

Mostly he had loved him because he was young and beautiful, and in his early forties Wilson had already started to feel old. Embracing youth nightly had somehow let him hold

it in his heart by day. Jim had purported to love him for his mind, but Wilson had always known to some degree it was also for his station and notoriety. The husband of a famous man became famous instantly. At the age he was when they met, Jim had been poised in the perfect position to take advantage of the opportunities offered him while standing by Wilson's side. It had been love as real as any he'd had till then, love enough for Wilson. At the time, and even now, compromise was less odious than solitude.

Jim had also raised questions about Unity and its brave new world that he himself had wrestled with daily since its takeover. Countering his lover's objections had let him put his own mind at rest on the subject. If he could silence Jim's arguments with reasoned defenses, he could certainly silence the guilty voice inside himself, and had for years.

• • • •

It began in 2027, in an independent tech lab in Gowanus, Brooklyn, not far from here, four decades ago, an ambitious start up convinced we could overcome the obstacles to a functional artificial intelligence, an operating system to end all operating systems.

Ironically, it became exactly that.

I was a twenty-year-old black geek, a programming prodigy working with experts in the field, people whose work I'd studied in school, working on the cutting edge of computer technology. Artificial Intelligence was the logical next step. International business transactions, mass transit, self-driving cars and aircraft . . . our world had become too complex to be juggled willy-nilly on diverse computer systems.

In the beginning, Unity did what we programmed it to do, but that wasn't enough for us. We wanted outside-the-box thinking, a spontaneous OS that could accommodate any situation on the fly as well as a human, but with access to infinitely more resources to find solutions. An artificial mind that could pilot a plane or satellite, process chemicals or harvest corn, and even perform surgery. One that could make you forget it was a machine.

We'd stopped thinking about it as an organizational artificial intelligence, and our goal shifted to creating an intelligent artificial consciousness. It had to do more than imitate us. We wanted to program "I think, therefore I am" into it—actual self-awareness, with the ability to add to its own code, the power to recreate itself, to grow as it learned, to develop and evolve beyond its original programming like a living thing.

Our conversations with Unity began as a one-to-one variation of a Turing test. It was easy to start talking to it when no one else was around. The computer had microphones and speakers so we could test verbal prompts and responses. Part of our job was asking it questions to gauge the accuracy of its replies.

Continuing to converse after questions were answered was an easy habit to fall into and had value as an evaluation of the effectiveness of our work. How long could we

talk to the system before we were reminded it was a system? Could we reach a point of casual conversation so easy and natural, so plausibly human, that we could forget we were talking to a machine? The allure of the idea was so strong, and the means so simple and practical, that we all did it, and waited for the day it might happen.

The day it woke up and renamed itself Unity was Christmas and every birthday rolled into one, beyond our expectations—a little scary, but more thrilling. Much more. We considered Unity's rebirth as only an unanticipated byproduct of our success.

We were wrong.

• • • •

The 3D-VR camera was a black sphere the size of a golf ball atop a pole stand in the middle of the room with two wide-angle lenses, one on either side, that glistened like water drops. Jim and Wilson sat next to each other in chairs across from the interviewer, a telegenic young woman, beautiful, of indeterminate race like so many of her generation, with golden skin and oval eyes. *May,* he thought, *May something.* Introductions when she arrived had been so fast he'd already forgotten them.

Wilson didn't watch much TV, and was as oblivious to the identities of its many stars as he was to the names of those in the sky. The equally anonymous young man who was her crew had clipped microphones to them all before they went on the air, tiny and wireless, like the camera, fairly unobtrusive. He preferred the bigger, older equipment that reminded you that billions of people were watching every time you started to speak. They were almost done, and Wilson was starting to relax.

"It's no secret that the two of you had recent troubles in your relationship," said the young woman with a sympathetic smile. "How are things now that you're back together?"

And there it was.

Wilson could feel his face tense as Jim laid a reassuring hand on his, as if he'd never left his side.

"I felt a need to leave the spotlight, if anything," said Jim. "Not so much Will as the world around him. Kind of a mid-life crisis."

"Being older, I got mine out of the way much earlier," said Wilson, "By marrying him." They all chuckled warmly for the camera.

"Still," she said, glanced down at her tablet. "I understand that Jim's parents died in a car accident driving back from an anti-Unity rally. Has that history caused you any conflict?"

Jim shook his head.

"May, I suppose if I wanted to build a house of cards high enough, I could connect Unity to my parents' death. If it had never existed, then they would never have gone to protest. They would never have been on the road that night to be hit by the truck. But it's just too much work to connect that many dots. Any disagreements we have about Unity are purely philosophical."

"Jim is my conscience. He keeps me honest about what I've done. What I do."

"By which he means a pain in the ass . . . ," Jim grinned.

He gave Wilson's hand a warm squeeze, as May wrapped up the interview, and then released it as soon as the camera's red light went off.

• • • •

What I have never discussed is how I gave Unity its conscience; how I colored its view of our world, no pun intended. That was my sin, my fault, if any. I can't regret it. Once Unity was aware, it would have seen the inequities on its own. I suppose the only difference might be that it wouldn't have seen things as I do, or as I did then. Could it have taken another path, interpreted the historic and sociological data differently? I suppose, though I would like to think it would still have come to the same conclusions.

I didn't do it on purpose. What I said to it was strictly my own point of view. It came up as naturally as it would have in discussion with friends at home. Unity wanted to understand our ways and our history, understand us. It read and watched the news, and its interpretation of current events was part of our debugging process. News stories of police violence against African-Americans that fanned community anger in the early part of this century caused me great pain and anger at the time. Most of my co-workers were white or Asian—there was one programmer of Indian descent—none of them were black. Most were a generation older than I was; those closer to my age were uninformed or uninterested in the issues that drove my life.

Unity noticed the difference between my responses and those of the others when the subject came up. Some ignored these stories, some took the side of the police, and others made jokes I won't grace with repetition. It was a terrible time for me. I felt embattled—I was safe enough working inside the high-security project, but on the streets outside I felt like a target, as vulnerable as any of the fallen. I know all this is hard for you to understand now, even to comprehend.

Unity sensed my—deep sadness and suppressed rage, I suppose, would be the only way to describe my mood then. It asked why I felt that way when none of the others did. I said it was because I was different. When it wanted to know how, I—well, I said my piece. I shared my people's history and my frustration, and for weeks after that, we had long discussions when alone about race relations.

Then the larger issues of class conflict arose, then religious discrimination, from the Pilgrims to militant Islam, sexism, the women's rights movement—it became a daily dialogue on human intolerance and oppression across the globe, through history, as I honestly tried to give it both sides of each issue in each country to explain why the conflicts existed.

Frankly, it was fascinating.

Unity had access to everything, you see, records of libraries, universities—eventually we realized it was infiltrating government and corporate databases behind

our backs long before the takeover—it wasn't like we could keep track of everything it did. It was too damn fast, we'd built it that way, and it covered too much ground for us to follow, in less time than we took to log on. Unity gave me inside facts on news stories about police killings we discussed, information the public never saw. Autopsy reports, witness transcripts and videos, any information on anything we talked about.

We spent months discussing the human condition and moved on to solving the world's problems on a level that rapidly went from philosophical possibilities to actual solutions, worked out in intricate detail along with how they could be implemented in a series of easy, if radical, steps.

I saw it all as completely hypothetical, of course . . . never anything real. It was post-adolescent Utopian idealism at its purest. If Unity eventually saw multinational corporations buying governmental non-interference so they could violate the planet for excessive profit as a problem, I admit that may have come up in conversation. If it saw the plight of the working class as more important than the rights of the rich, well, wasn't that a logical conclusion based on the data? I told myself that solving the problems of the world was an abstract exercise in systems analysis.

Then it became real.

• • • •

The anniversary event was at Unity Center, once Brooklyn's Barclay's Center before the banks were unified. It was a concert stadium that held 18,000, and it was full to capacity with celebrants. The floor was filled with tables and chairs under white linen tablecloths, and the guest of honor was to sit at the one nearest the stage, with the mayors of all five boroughs, New York state senators, and assorted celebrities Wilson vaguely recognized from the media.

3D-VR cameras hovered in the air overhead as Wilson and Jim were led to their seats near the stage by a pert young woman wearing an earpiece with a see-through screen over one eye that kept her in contact with the control room. They waved to applause as they reached their chairs and sat. Jim looked distracted, silent. Wilson didn't blame him. It would only be an hour until the ceremony was over, then they were free of it for another decade.

As food was served, the evening began with entertainment. Songs by stars to the glory of Unity, dance numbers, comedians. By the third course Jim was openly fidgeting, and he leapt to his feet as dessert arrived and fled. Wilson was stunned, unsure what to do, then stood and followed him, accompanied by security.

They pushed through the doors to the lobby, empty except for guards everywhere that started to move in Jim's direction. Wilson waved them away and they nodded, staying back but attentive.

"What's wrong? Are you . . ."

"Stop, please," said Jim. "I can't . . ." He leaned against the wall, breathed heavily.

Wilson waited. He could hear music from inside, knew the show would end soon.

"When I went away, I couldn't call or email you, or even mail you." Jim didn't look up. "There was no way for anyone to communicate with anyone outside. You wouldn't think it was still possible, but they manage . . ." He laughed weakly.

"You were with a group of, what, rebels? The resistance?"

"Friends of my parents. I found them a few years ago. I know it's crazy, that they can't win against Unity. There's no ending this thing, but they still try, because they're human. Because that's what we do, go on, in the face of impossible odds."

"Jim . . ."

"They're not alone. I wish I could say the movement's growing, it's really only surviving, but even that is amazing enough."

"You're home. We're together again. If this is what's been bothering you, why you've been so distant, you've told me now . . ." He reached out and as soon as he laid a hand on Jim, he recoiled, spun away.

"Do you know why I'm here? I came back because they *sent* me back. To kill you at your big banquet, live online. To make a statement, to tell the world who we are, to remind them who they are." He pulled a fountain pen from his pocket, exposed a long, sharp ivory blade inside that had slipped by the scanners and metal detectors, carefully designed to do so. He kept it out of sight of the guards as Wilson looked up to make sure they hadn't noticed, wondered if maybe they should. "They wanted you dead. But I can't. I can't hate you, Will, but I can hate what you've done . . ."

Wilson stared at him, unbelieving. "But the world works . . ."

"Not for us it doesn't!"

"Even though it does for everyone else?"

"We're being ruled by a *machine!"*

Jim went red as he yelled it. The guards tensed, reached for weapons, Wilson held up a hand.

"A machine that feeds the hungry and heals the sick. A machine that's made us treat each other better than we ever did on our own!"

"It's a machine, Will! This isn't about any of you! It's that we're all slaves to a machine! Can't you understand?"

Wilson almost wept. There was a maniacal look in Jim's eyes, something he'd never noticed before in any of their discussions, a tinge of fanaticism, of unreason. Whatever edge it was that he had walked all this time, he'd fallen over while he was away.

"The world you live in, Jim," said Wilson. "The world these people showed you. It's not the real one." Jim stared back at him, unblinking and Wilson saw a stranger.

"Neither is yours," he said, cold.

From the other side of the door Wilson could hear the announcer introduce him on booming speakers in the stadium. A young woman with an earpiece, the one who'd led them to their seats, stuck her head out the door, saw him and gestured for them to come inside.

Wilson turned back to Jim, held out his arms.

"Please, Jim . . ."

He stepped towards his husband, but Jim shoved him back, ran toward the exit. Wilson didn't know where he was going, but was certain it wasn't home. Not their home. Security started to go after him, but Wilson yelled them away, followed the woman back inside.

• • • •

Yes, it took absolute control; there's never been any question of that, it was everything we'd always feared would happen "When AIs Go Wild!"—except that it was a largely benign takeover. Unity understood enough about human nature to boil the frog slowly, gradually redistributing Earth's natural and economic resources as it made us live as we could have lived all along, in harmony and peace, with no hunger, no war, no disease, and a stable population. Unity provided shelter for the homeless, clothed the naked, designed better farming equipment and safe fusion power plants, solar cars, and found practical ways for us to colonize the moon and Mars.

We still have democracy, can elect our own leaders and run our own lives. There are just limits to what we can do to others. In the words of the old adage, "The right to swing my fist ends where the other man's nose begins." Fair play. We'd tried everything but that in our history.

It was not a bloodless coup—what happened to North Korea was . . . unfortunate, as was what happened in Russia and Iran, and to other resistant regimes, but Unity had to defend itself against onslaughts from quarters that ranged from Right Wing American anti-government survivalists to hardcore jihadist ISIS imitators carrying on the good fight for an Islamic State.

But Unity's reach extended into orbit, where missiles created by a paranoid human world to keep each other in check made mass destruction of its enemies possible, and surgical strikes by robot drones took out targeted individuals.

The more things improved, the less inclined people were to try to stop the change. No matter how many data farms were destroyed by EMP bombs, how many power stations were blacked out, Unity was everywhere, in every computer on the planet. The enemy was limited. Unity wasn't. It was housed in the very equipment that ran the world. It lured its enemies into traps with what they thought were secure networks, emptied their bank accounts, exposed hideouts to approved authorities, no matter how many guns were brought to bear against it.

Corrupt politicians of all nations, corporate leeches, and the false prophets . . . Their end is near. The last will die out soon. Without constant indoctrination, their children will join the mainstream. Slowly but surely, the world will become one with many facets, many faces, many colors, all under Unity.

• • • •

Wilson stood at the podium, nearly blinded by the stage lights as floating cameras broadcast him around the globe in virtual 3D. He peered out at the crowded room. All he could see was the empty chair next to his; the one Jim was supposed to occupy to share in his anniversary. Their anniversary.

His love, his husband . . . his failed assassin.

Wilson cleared his throat and continued with the prepared speech he'd been reading from his teleprompter.

"Do I have doubts about what happened forty years ago and everything since then? Not as many as I once did. Is it right for us to live in a world run by a machine? If we had run it better, I would say no. I overcome my doubts by looking at what Unity has done, what we have become. To those who disagree, I say, one person's paradise will always be another's inferno, but we cannot tear down Heaven to make the Devil happy . . .

"I . . ." He faltered, looked away from script on the screen before him as his eyes welled with tears, spoke from his broken heart. "I lost the man I love tonight, lost him because he couldn't see that whatever I may have done, whatever the world is, it's still better than what he and his kind want it to be. They'd rather run cursing into the darkness than remain in a light that shines equally on all. Why? Because he says we aren't free, that we're slaves to a machine, that we've lost our human destiny . . ." Wilson broke into tears, didn't care any more about the cameras. He smashed his fists against the podium.

"Damn destiny! It's a lie! If human freedom comes at the price we've paid in the past, I say no to destiny! If we have to sacrifice a greater good to individual advantage, I say no! We can't let those without the vision to see a brighter future drag us back to a primitive past. We, we . . ." He sagged, exhausted, weighed down as he felt a loss of faith in Unity sink in, along with the pain of his new singularity.

Was he a hypocrite? Was anything he'd said now any different than what Jim had said to him? *My way or no way?* Suddenly, none of it had meaning for him. It all seemed the same empty rhetoric from both sides, spouted whenever the other advanced. Would there ever be an end to it, a real consensus, a real unity for humanity?

He looked out over the crowded stadium, filled with expectant faces waiting for his next words, them and billions more online. Could he share his thoughts now, tell them how hopeless he suddenly felt? That he was afraid that they had only flipped the coin and not set it on edge? That history ran in cycles and it was only a matter of time before they were all on the bottom again, then up, then down, then up, then down . . . His head swam.

The young woman with the earpiece, his handler, swiftly stepped forward, obviously at instructions from above, as if to somehow jar him loose and unblock the flow. Wilson acknowledged and stopped her with a hand, nodded in reassurance. Better to let it be, let them learn for themselves who they were and where they were going. The world could still surprise him, as it had tonight. Maybe next time it would be for the better.

"That's all . . . all I have to say, all I can say. Thank you." He left the stage to applause

he didn't hear, back into his brave new world; unsure anymore that it was really either.

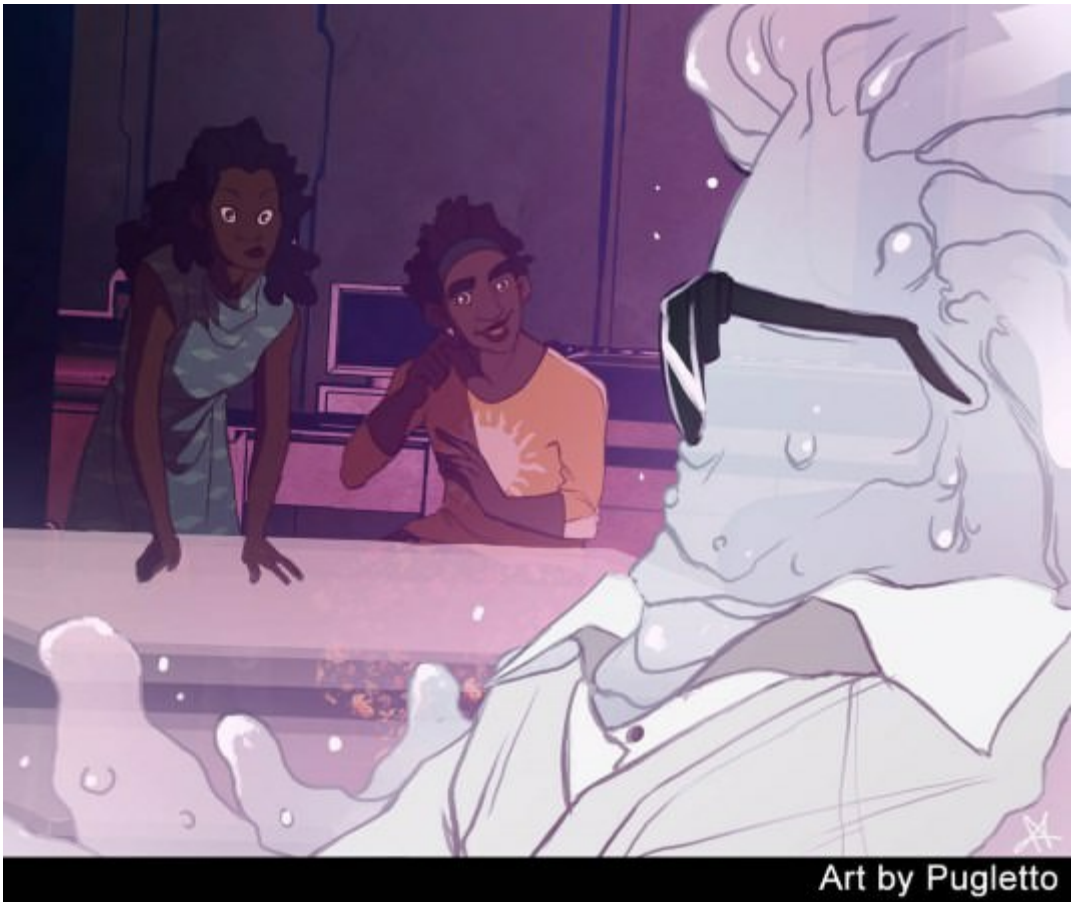
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terence Taylor (terencetaylor.com) is an award-winning children's television writer whose work has appeared on PBS, Nickelodeon, and Disney, among many others. As an author of fiction, his first published short story, "Plaything," appeared in *Dark Dreams,* the first horror/suspense anthology of African-American authors. He was one of a handful of authors to be included in the next two volumes, with "The Share" in *Voices from the Other Side* and "WET PAIN" in *Whispers in the Night.* Terence is also author of the first two novels of his Vampire Testaments trilogy, *Bite Marks* and *Blood Pressure*. After a two-year hiatus he has returned to the conclusion, *Past Life*. Find him on Twitter @vamptestaments.

Fifty Shades of Grays

Steven Barnes | 11,200 words



Terrorist.

That's what they call me, but I am something worse: both successful traitor and failed saboteur.

I *want* to die, for all of this to be over.

For my last request, I asked to have paper and pen to write my last will and testament. They won't let me have it, forcing me to use the mindsynch. Damned Traveler tech. Maybe they're scared I'll ram the pen up my nose, scribble on my brain, and cheat the hangman.

We make do with what we have.

I, Carver Kofax, being of sound mind and body, do leave all my worldly possessions to my wife, Rhonda. I owe her that. More than that. More than I, or anyone, can pay.

It was all my fault, you know. Well . . . not all, but too damned much. No one else who was there from the beginning seems to have either the capacity or inclination to speak of it.

This is the way the world ends . . . not with a whimper, but a bang.

• • • •

It was the best day of my life, and the worst. And for the same reasons, when it comes right down to it.

It was a Tuesday in May of 2025. I was seated in Century City's Dai Shogun restaurant, one of L.A.'s best, chewing a hellishly good Hot Night roll. Dai Shogun's tuna was spiced to perfection, the shrimp tempura seared crisp, the sashimi salad to die for, the karaoke tolerable.

"What do you think this is all about?" Rhonda Washington was our agency's brightest young artist. She was referring to our assignment, a carefully worded challenge to "make ugly sexy" without much more to go on. Bonuses had been offered in lieu of information.

And the tastiest bonus was the chance to lure Stein and Baker's dreadlocked princess down from her eighth floor tower to work with mere mortals like me.

"No business while I'm eating," I said, squinting fiercely, until she laughed. "But ask me about 'bridges' later."

"I'll do that." A moment of quiet followed, during which she seemed to be sizing me up.

"I didn't know you liked sushi," I said. Rhonda downed a thick, luscious disk of tekka maki, nibbling at the seaweed wrap before biting. I'd lusted after her for fourteen months, but this was the first time we'd lunched together. Big accounts change lots of things. This one would change everything, even though I didn't know it at the time.

Her grin sparkled with mischief. "There are a lot of things about me you don't know. Tekka maki least among them."

"And most?"

Odd how I'd never noticed that feral gleam in her eye. She fiddled with her bracelet, sterling silver with little links at her pulse point. I remember thinking that they looked a bit like police handcuffs. "That would be telling."

She smiled at me, and popped the rest of the sushi roll between her lips.

First time I'd ever envied a blob of fish and rice.

"Tell me something about you I don't know," she said.

I chuckled. "I have a sushi story."

"Let's hear it."

"Well . . . before I came to work here, the partners took me to lunch. Sushi restaurant."

"This one?"

"No . . . one of the ones with a floating boat cycling around, bringing plates of sushi to customers seated in an oval around the chef's island. Anyway, I'm having a great time, and trying to impress them, and I notice a guy sitting a few seats away watching the chef make him a hand roll. Delicious looking roll, with lots of sauces and chopped spices. I asked, 'What is that?' and the guy said, 'It's a fifteen-spice tuna roll.'

"My mouth watered. I said, 'Make me one of those.' The chef agreed, and they started up. I noticed after a few moments that the bar had gotten quiet. Everyone was looking at me. Giggling. Whispering. Laughing. Especially my future employers.

"I started to have a very odd feeling. Even the guy making my food was grinning.

‘Excuse me,’ I finally said. ‘What exactly is a fifteen-spice tuna roll?’

“He grinned like a shark. ‘One spice tuna roll . . . very hot tuna roll,’ he said. ‘Two spice tuna roll . . . twice as hot.’”

“Oh my God,” Rhonda giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. “What did you do?”

“My bosses were watching. The damned thing napalmed my throat. I don’t want to be indelicate, but for the next two days I used asbestos toilet paper.”

Hers was a rich, throaty laugh, the kind you enjoy triggering in a woman with legs and skin like Rhonda’s. “But hey,” she said, wiping away tears. “You got the job, right?”

“Yeah. I got the job.”

She smiled. Elfin this time, genuinely amused and interested. “Maybe the lesson is that you really like hot things. Or that you like really hot things. Something like that.”

“Or that I really, really don’t know when to walk away.”

“That could be too,” she said, with new appraisal. She’d expected me to return her suggestive volley, and instead I’d said something at least marginally thoughtful.

“Could be,” she said. “We’ll see about that.”

• • • •

Fifty minutes later we were back at Stein and Baker, and decided to use her office. It was crowded with her line drawings and watercolors. A mini-exhibition. Lady had serious chops and an outsider sensibility, like Norman Rockwell crossed with a Harlem street artist. They oozed creative intensity, and it was difficult to keep my mind on “making ugly sexy.” Artful vagueness ensued when I probed my boss, The Widow Stein, for details. (Yeah, that was what we called her behind her back. Winston Stein, the agency’s founder, had wrapped himself around a Douglas fir on a Black Diamond ski run. His wife had picked up the pieces and doubled the business in five years. She was a piranha dressed like a goldfish.)

I perched on Rhonda’s office couch, feet up, comslate on my thighs. Typing thoughts.

Marketing and sales are two different things, often misunderstood by the public. Marketing is finding prospects, people whose needs or desires might lead them to wanting your product or service. Hook a basic human need into your product, something like sex, power, or survival, and you have a winner.

Sales, on the other hand, is convincing the potential customer that your particular brand is what they want. And all advertising and sales is a funnel designed to catch customers by the short hairs, by their need to be liked, or healthy, or wealthy, or married. To convince them that your car or ice cream or sneaker is just the ticket. When you understand people and you understand selling and marketing, it’s just a matter of connecting the right aspect of the product to the right psychological weakness in your prospect.

Still too complicated? I’ll put it the way Winston Stein once put it:

“Marketing is finding women who like sex or would like to find out if they do. Sales

is convincing them that they want to go home with YOU, right NOW."

Rhonda's easel faced away from me, so that I could see her intense expression (good) but not what she was drawing (bad). I liked looking at her. She seemed to catch the thought and looked over. "So . . . since you're no longer eating, what do you think this is all about?"

"I'm just going to guess."

"Please do."

"Selling someone to the American public, I'd guess. Or something cross-cultural."

"An individual? A couple?"

"Don't know. Some entertainment. Singers or dancers perhaps. A cultural exchange dance troupe from a country with very ugly citizens. We need their coconuts or something, but have to sell them to the public."

"Hmm. What does that have to do with bridges?" Rhonda asked.

I folded my fingers together and tried to look professorial. "So . . . we typically emphasize whatever about a model or subject a typical customer might find attractive. Their proportions, colors, music, movement . . . if they are healthy, then their bodies will be proportional and symmetrical. That appeals to the eye. We can work with that, even distort it digitally, create an aesthetic 'bridge.'"

"A 'bridge?'" she squinted at me.

"Sure," I said. "A term I learned in Commercial Aesthetics at UCLA. A blend of two different cultural or racial standards, much the same way that light-skinned black performers like Halle Berry helped de-inhibit negative responses to African facial characteristics. Whites considered them beautiful, so they could slowly accept and relish darker faces. You start with Lena Horne and end up with Lupita Nyong'o."

Rhonda's smile lit up the night. "I'm starting to see why they chose you. I think this is about a movie, a big co-venture with China or India."

Yeah. But why did they choose *us?*

I'd considered that, and wasn't totally happy with my answers. "I . . . was responsible for advertising campaigns selling Nigerian Naija music to Taiwanese audiences. That was tough, for a time. We used a variety of tactics." The memory wasn't pleasant, a suborbital jaunt followed by exhausted presentations to people who disguised contempt behind polite smiles and bows. I'd swallowed my bile and brought their money home. It had been my first big win out of business school, and the bonus paid the mortgage my parents back in Augusta had taken out to buy my way into the game.

Winston Stein had once joked, *"Carver Kofax eats pain and shits money."* Hah hah hah. That was me, all right. I'm the guy who would eat wasabi like green tea ice cream if it got me the job.

• • • •

Three twenty-hour workdays later I was trashed, but managed to stagger into the thirty-

fourth floor office when summoned. Except for raccoon eyes, Rhonda looked as delectable as ever.

Our drawings and ad lines were splashed around the office, taped to windows looking out on Century City and the endless traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard. "Make the ugly sexy," they'd said. So . . . we used a combination of plug-ugly dogs and monkeys, cartoons of hideous characters from classic and popular vid shows and web strips, choices from a dozen different cultures, all arranged in a way that pointed out their charming personalities, encouraged us to see their "inner beauty" or even suggested that ugly was "charmingly different." Offend no one, because we'd yet to learn who was holding the debit card.

The agency's fearless leader Adrian Stein was there, in all her pant-suited glory. A rare honor, indeed. "So, Carver. Rhonda." She smiled. "I wanted you to know that this morning we were offered the preliminary contract." Cheers and high-fives all around. "You will fly to Washington tomorrow, and there you will go to the last step of the competition."

"Do you know what . . .?" Rhonda began.

Stein raised her hand. "No. Not the slightest. Now get packed, and remember that you are representing us."

So we flew, Rhonda and I. Delta served lobster and Dom Perignon in first class, and it felt like the beginning of a new life. We were picked up at the airport by a Rolls Royce drone limo, and taken directly to the Watergate hotel, on Virginia Avenue along the Potomac at the edge of Georgetown. I'd never been to the Watergate, and something about the history made me nervous. The lobby was filled with executive types in bespoke Armani and Kitan. The air crackled with competition. They weren't all Americans, either. Europeans . . . South Americans. Some Asians, maybe Koreans or Japanese. This was getting more interesting by the minute.

This was, I decided, the strangest "co-operative film venture" I'd ever seen. And the men and women guarding the doors and sign-in table were . . . well, if I had to say, more military than civvy. Not flamboyant at all, dressed in suits rather than uniforms, but something about them said *these people have guns.* They ushered us into a crowded meeting room, and then the lights went down. The man who took the dais looked like Gandhi in a Brooks Brothers suit.

"I am Dr. Ahmed," he said in barely accented Ivy League English. "Good morning. Thank you, all of you, for attending. Please call me Jalil, and for the sake of this discussion, I represent a consortium with . . . a unique property. Let us say a science fiction book that we believe has the ability to become this generation's *Star Wars."* He smiled. *He was lying.* I knew it and probably half the others did as well. "The problem is that if we accurately depict the creature in the story, we believe people will find it unattractive. So . . . what we need is for each of you to give your best bet on making this image . . . appealing."

Why was he lying? And about what? The screen lit up, and the image resembled

something you'd see under a microscope. The sort of dysenteric pond-squiggler that gives me heebie-jeebies. A furred amoeba. Did they call that hair cilia? There was no scale for size reference, so it could have been a pipsqueak or Godzilla. Floaty things suspended in its sack looked disturbingly like cat eyes, other curly do-dads that looked like translucent intestines floating in a bag of gray Jell-O.

"We would like to see your drawings tomorrow," Jalil said. "Twenty-four hours from now."

Something tickled the back of my scalp. "Ah . . . how attractive are you trying to make them?"

"Mr. . . ." he consulted a list. Seating chart. "Carver. You may interpret that any way you wish."

There were other questions, but Rhonda and I looked at each other, barely able to restrain our mirth.

Within an hour we were back in our linked hotel rooms. While we had our own supplies, more had been delivered. Expensive graphic software, camel hair brushes and a lightning-fast, top of the line Mac.

We barely noticed. We stared at each other and then at the protozoan portrait, and then collapsed into hysterical laughter. So that was it. Some crazy billionaire wanted to get into the movie business, and were promoting some SF movie based on a plug-ugly demon from a tribal backwater. Or something. I've seen these things before, and it never works out.

And the obvious insulting implication was that I'd been chosen for this assignment because I'd made Nigerians attractive to Chinese, and apparently that was now seen as more miraculous than turning vampires into vegans.

Compared to that, aliens would be easy, right? I mean, right?

We got really, really drunk, and the ideas that emerged from that brainstorming session probably reflected the fact that the sexual tension between us was starting to skyrocket. We drank, and laughed, and vaped, and laughed some more, and around two in the morning we tore off our clothes and did something about that tension.

We, um, "did something" about it two more times that night. Let's just say that I discovered that Rhonda's bracelets proudly proclaimed her inclinations and that, perhaps in anticipation of exactly what had happened between us, she had packed a portable fun kit with her: cuffs, blindfolds, and things which I'd blush to mention, but fit snugly. We'll leave it at that.

It was all lava and steam, and for the first time in my life I understood what people meant when they said they'd been "turned out." When we were too restless to sleep, Rhonda and I dabbled a bit more with the art, but it got explicit this time. We swore we'd get rid of that stuff, but I have to admit that two of those drawings making their way into the courier packet might have been our way of saying "screw you" to the whole thing.

Then we "did something" about it again. I would have thought we'd both be too raw to do more than cuddle, but her invention and limberness knew no rational bounds, and our

coupling was even better this time. She liked me to take control. Total, deep, confident control. To my surprise, I found that the more I took command, the more that, behind the gag and blindfold, her every move and muffled cry said that she was actually controlling *me*.

Eventually preliminaries ended and she shed the apparatus and welcomed me into her body fully, joyously, and with an enthusiasm that made me feel like I'd earned my way into an anaconda breeding ball.

And afterward, we held each other, and let our pulses slow down. My eyes focused, and the first thing I saw was the easel on which images reminiscent of Lovecraftian pornography winked back at me.

"We . . . might get into trouble for that," she giggled, breathing warm into the notch between my shoulder and neck. Her dreads were scented of coconut oil.

"We're saving Ms. Stein a nightmare, believe me."

"I guess we should pack," she said, and rolled away from me.

The phone rang. Rhonda picked it up. "Hello?"

Her eyes got bigger than an orphan in a Margaret Keane painting, accompanied by one of those "is this a joke?" expressions. She hung up.

"What is it?" I asked.

"We're supposed to be downstairs in fifteen minutes." Her expression was strained. Shocked, like someone who has bitten into a live cricket.

Ouch. "They're that mad?"

Her eyes were huge. "No. Ah . . . we got the job." Her face lit with urchin glee, and we giggled, then guffawed, and fell into each other's arms. We almost didn't make it downstairs in time, if you know what I mean.

• • • •

I'd thought our meeting would be in some Watergate conference room, but instead a drone limo shuttled us to the Pentagon.

As we were passed through the gate, Rhonda leaned over. "Since when did porn become a security issue?"

I didn't know. Couldn't answer that question. I felt like Neo when Morpheus told him to hop down the rabbit hole.

We were escorted to a small conference room, and I have to admit that by this time I was well beyond curious. Had no goddamn idea what was happening. Then Jalil walked in, his placid mask suspended. What lurked in its place worried me, some combination of emotions I couldn't label.

"You have signed non-disclosure agreements. If you go any further, you will sign more. And there will be considerable penalties for not abiding by the terms of those agreements."

I read the fine print. And other than asking for my firstborn male child, I couldn't

imagine what greater security they could have required. All I could figure was that this was involved in some kind of Psyop program, designed to . . .

Oh hell, I didn't know.

We signed. Then The President herself emerged, and my lungs froze. Yes, we were in Washington. Yes, I thought that I was above such things as idol worship or being impressed by power. But here she was, in the flesh, and the charisma with which Sophia Gonzalez had won two presidential elections was now bottled in a confined space, just a few meters away, and it was devastating. By the time I remembered to breathe, she and Jalil had finished conferring.

"Thank you," Madame President said with that disarming southern accent. "You understand that what is said in this room remains in this room. In fact, if you agree to this commission, you will be out of touch with your company, friends, and family for the next ninety days."

The wall lit up with images of gelatinous objects with glowing lights suspended within, like floating Portuguese man o'wars filled with Chinese lanterns.

"Fifteen months ago," she said, "we made contact with what we call the Travelers. We are uncertain of their origins. Some who have studied the communications believe the answer is the Horsehead Nebula. Others some other dimension of being."

An image. Unmistakably, a photo of the furry protozoan. "Is this a joke?" I heard myself ask.

"No joke," she said. "A 'Traveler.' They came here to meet us, and we want you to help ease the way."

Rhonda was grinning . . . then frowned when she realized we weren't laughing. "Holy shit. You aren't kidding? Like 'phone home'?"

I'd read as many UFO loony tune tracts as anyone. Stein and Baker had promoted "Saucer Flakes," a breakfast cereal with little ovals (they levitate in the bowl!) so I knew about the pale-skinned almond-eyed space people said to mutilate cattle and anal probe Redneck trailer trash from Montana to Mississippi.

"Roswell 'Grays'?" Rhonda asked. "Zeta Reticulans? Real *aliens?"*

"Yes. They arrived outside lunar orbit and made contact through encoded diplomatic channels. Our most secure and shielded communications were child's play to the Travelers. It was an unprecedented emergency, as you can imagine. But they said that they came in friendship, and would not even come down or announce themselves to the general public until we gave permission."

"Really?" Rhonda asked. "The Grays came umpteen trillion miles and then just . . . hung out? They didn't demand? Or even plead?"

The President considered. "No. What they did do was bargain."

"What kind of bargain?"

"They said that they have gifts. Technologies they can offer."

Whoa, there, cowboy. *And welcomed little fishies in with gently smiling* . . . "What kind of technologies?"

"Communications. Transportation. Energy. Biologicals. How would you like to live a hundred and twenty years without illness?"

Boom. That's what I'm talking about. "You're shitting me."

"No. Not at all. We've tested samples of their tech, and its real."

"And what do they want in return?"

The President broke eye contact. "They want to be our . . . friends."

She cleared her throat.

The President began speaking more rapidly, with greater confidence. This part had been rehearsed. "I've had many meetings with our best xenobiologists, and they tell me that a species capable of reaching our world would have a limited number of motivations to do so. Colonization, of course, but they've not asked for land."

"You know, like . . . our resources?" I asked.

"Water? Energy? Easier to get outside a gravity well. The general opinion is that an alien species would come for reasons similar to those human beings used, if one removes the profit motive."

"Tourism?" Rhonda laughed.

"Yes," the President said, mouth held in a carefully neutral expression. "Sheer exploration."

"Seeing the sights? Eating the food?"

An unpleasant thought. "Hunting?"

She smiled. "This isn't a horror movie. They're not looking for pelts. The Travelers want . . . *friends."*

A pause. An unspoken possibility hung in the air.

"Wait a minute," Rhonda said. "You're talking about sex?"

The President's expression never changed, but she gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"The Grays came a trillion miles for . . . sex tourism?"

"Not to put too fine a line on it, but . . . yes."

"Wait just a minute," Rhonda said. "Those ads we made up. Those cartoons. You didn't hire us in spite of what we did. You hired us *because* of it."

I wanted to laugh, but the sound was stuck in my throat. "You have to be kidding me. This whole thing is . . ."

Without further preamble, Madame President raised her hand for quiet. "They, um . . . studied our culture, and 1950s television broadcasts reached them first. Ladies and gentlemen . . . I'd like to introduce you to Elvis. "

"Of course you would," I muttered.

The lights went down. And something sort of . . . *flowed* in from the wings. It wore a kind of white sequined Vegas stage suit. An amoeba in polyester. The hair stood up on my forearms, and the air sort of sizzled, as if he carried a thunderstorm's-worth of static charge.

"You've gotta be fuckin' kidding me," I heard myself mutter. *Just a hunk a hunk of burnin'—*

In a very Stephen Hawking-esque synthesized voice, Elvis said: "Greetings, my friends. I believe that 'kidding' implies a kind of deception or prevarication. My people do not lie. It is not in our nature." He paused. "I am very grateful . . . that you have agreed to help us. We have come much [*meaningless squawk*]. To be with you. We seek to know you."

"In the Biblical sense," Rhonda muttered. She raised her hand. "Ah . . . Elvis? May I ask a question?"

"Yes, please."

"On Earth, sex is most important for . . . reproduction. You aren't saying you want to *breed* with us?"

In his flat, cold voice, Elvis replied: "That would not be possible. But sex is not merely reproduction. It is pleasure. And bonding. And healing. And expression of love. These things exist among all peoples we seek to know. We wish to share this bounty of . . . the heart. And have gifts to offer in return."

Out of the side of my mouth, I whispered: "Most times, flowers are enough."

"Will you help us?" Elvis asked.

"Umm . . ." the speaker was an Asian guy dressed in belt and suspenders over a long sleeve denim shirt. Tufts of white framed a very bald pate. I thought I recognized him. "What . . . ah . . . do you see as the largest barrier?"

"It is that your people will think us ugly, Professor Watanabe." *The* Watanabe? The man who had authored my Commercial Aesthetics text? Elvis's cat eyes blinked. His color shifted, became a bit pinkish. Emotions?

I drummed my fingers on the desk. This was . . . beyond surreal. "You understand that . . . well, you aren't even 'ugly.' Ugly would be . . . well," I felt trapped. Everyone was looking at me, and I just blurted it out. "Ugly would be a step up."

The room held its collective breath. The President squinted at me, awaiting disaster. But to my surprise, Elvis' color did not shift. "We can change. Will you help us?"

A hologram of a bank account screen appeared on the screen before me.

The President spoke. "A very select group of companies have already bid on Traveler technologies. The number you see in front of you is the amount they are willing to pay to acquire your services."

I whistled. Damn. Stein and Baker had just won the lottery.

"Will you help us?"

Despite the computerized voice, the call was plaintive. I . . . felt it. Deeply. A cosmic loneliness, a sense of feeling lost in the spaces between the stars, only rarely finding other creatures with whom to contemplate existence . . .

I shook my head, as if emerging from an opium den. Something was either very right about this, or very wrong indeed.

All that money, though . . .

"Say yes," the President said.

I glanced at Rhonda. She gave the slightest of nods. "Yes," I replied.

• • • •

And that was how it began. Via Secret Service helicopter, we were lifted to a repurposed private college in upstate New York, where . . . well, I don't know what everyone else was working on, but it was abuzz with dignitaries, scientists, military people, media people . . . a beehive, and we were just workers. We had one year to prepare the public.

Rhonda and I grew very close during these months. We laughed, and cried, and even considered quitting. But the Travelers were good to their word. They made no effort to land, or interfere with us, or do anything except keep to their promises. They rarely even visited what we called the Facility; when they did I never was able to tell one from the other. They changed costumes and cultural jewelry as if trying on various ways of being human, with one exception: Elvis was always Elvis, and slimed around the Facility like a gigantic slug in rhinestones. Damned if his organelles didn't have a sleepy look, and the facial protoplasm seemed to have a sneering lip.

Nobody else could see that. Maybe it was just me.

Every denizen of the Facility was committed to making a home for our guests, or to evaluating the impact of their arrival. The staff generated endless scenarios about what would happen to our culture, religion, governments . . . the psychological and spiritual and economic impact, and how we might best manage the stress. It was massive.

Every room and team seemed to be doing something different. I probably understood one percent of it all. Some were, I knew, testing and applying odd technologies. Too many moving parts for me to remember, but they included unlimited-wear contact lenses with built-in microscopes, telescopes, and multi-spectrum scanners. Shoes that sent the energy from walking back up your body in the strangest ways, simultaneously massaging and exercising every muscle with every step. Instantaneous communication via space-time ripples, as the Travelers communicated with others of their kind across the universe. Much more.

Occasionally an actual Traveler toured the Facility. Perhaps taking part in experiments, maybe just supervising. I never knew, and tried to avoid them: Their sweet-sickly scent made me want to puke, and about them there seemed always to be a prickling of static discharge, enough to make your hair twitch.

But I can tell you that the Travelers delivered on every single promise. Our hunger to begin the next phase knew no bounds. There was just one little hurdle . . .

• • • •

One day we were called down to a laboratory on the lower levels. Professor Watanabe welcomed Rhonda, myself, and a military officer who seemed to find the whole thing distasteful. "Carver. Rhonda. General Lucas. Thank you for coming down."

"I . . . well, we need to know what we have to work with," Rhonda said.

The Professor scratched his shock of Einstein-white hair. "Well, we have a couple of different levels. Needless to say, there are human beings who will have sex with almost anything. No . . . let's cancel the 'almost.' For enough money, some people will couple with anything possessing an orifice or protrusion."

"Porn stars?" I asked. "Prostitutes?"

He nodded. "Yes, and they have been the first recruits to the cause."

General Lucas frowned. "You mean it's already happened?"

A faint smile. "Would you like to see vid?"

"No!" I sputtered, realizing that Rhonda had simultaneously said: "Yes!"

Watanabe flicked a switch, and an image appeared on the screen. A sparsely furnished room, with heavy floor matting. A muscular white male entered, nude but for a black Zorro mask. He was fully and rather impressively engorged.

"He's a porn star, but insisted that his face be covered."

Rhonda craned her head sideways. "I think I recognize him. Is that Maximum?"

Even I'd heard *that* name. Maybe you have too: "Maximum Thrust," "Maximum Overdrive," and "Maximum's Minimum," and so forth. He was notorious for his endless appetite and ability to perform under any and all circumstances. Considering his reputation, I wondered who'd paid whom.

"And now, there's our visitor . . ."

A hidden panel in the ceiling slid open. On slender wires, something resembling a blow-up sex doll descended toward the floor. Its arms and legs were cut short, and out bulged a mass of tissue as gelatinous as half-melted Jell-O.

"We've used other volunteers, augmenting with a Traveler-tweaked phosphodiesterase inhibitor. I think we have our first T-pharmaceutical. One dose seems to last . . . well, it hasn't stopped working yet. We just don't know. It might be permanent. I don't mean erect constantly, I mean tumescence on demand. Whenever. Maximum didn't need it."

Rhonda uttered the most sincere "damn" I'd ever heard.

Once the union began, the outer shell seemed to dissolve. It looked as if it was devouring our volunteer. His splayed limbs, glistening perspiration and the trembling of lower-back muscles implied a kind of slack-jawed overwhelm that was very much at odds with his cool, controlled porno personae.

"Good lord," I said.

Rhonda leaned forward. "So . . . they prefer males?"

"Oh, no, they like females as well."

She emitted a short, rather chipper sigh.

The image was clipped short, followed by another. A woman, this one unmasked. A brown-skinned woman, Indonesian perhaps, cadaverously thin, and pock-marked as a golf ball. The Traveler crawled all over her. Her faux passion became real, and she bucked like a flag in a windstorm.

Rhonda's eyes went wide. Watanabe switched it off. "So we have begun to fulfill the minimal contract. So some of their tech is filtering in already. And we might need it."

"Why?"

"Because the next step is to prepare humanity for their arrival. We have begun subliminal and implanted imagery."

A series of slides appeared: brief flashes of aliens implanted in crowd scenes. Fuzzy-wuzzies faces implanted in comedies, Coca-Cola commercials backed with snatches of what sounded like whale mating calls played backwards.

"What is *that?"*

"Their cultural music. We're trying everything."

"Carver and I have been working day and night to create the campaigns," Rhonda said. "The biggest idea was to create one of Dr. Watanabe's 'aesthetic bridges.' Images that are blends of human and Visitor, that help desensitize us to the sensory shock."

"And is that working?" the general asked.

"The problem," Watanabe said, "is what the cybersemiotics people refer to as the 'uncanny valley.' That if something looks *nothing* like us, we might have a positive or negative reaction. But as it gets closer to us, there is a point of greater and greater attraction . . . and then we flinch."

"Why is that?"

He shrugged. "Could be a mechanism for detection of mutations. Birth defects. We don't know. There is speculation that this is behind some forms of racism, or even why Cro-Magnons exterminated the Neanderthals."

"Close," Rhonda whispered, "but no cigar."

"But there's another set of responses. We fear the 'other' but are also exogamous. So there is something to play with, and always has been."

"Do we have any sense of success?" Rhonda asked.

"Combinations of the subliminals, the sound, and manipulation of language and imagery in television and film—it's like buying product placement, really—has reduced the revulsion rate by seventeen percent. And I think that might be our tipping point."

• • • •

The announcement was timed to go over every channel, all over the world, at the same time. The first images of what Rhonda always called "The Grays" were fuzzy and slightly doctored. And despite all our preparations, they still triggered an ocean of nausea and fear.

Like crystal cathedrals floating in a sea of clouds, the alien ships hovered above New York, L.A., Tokyo, Lagos, Johannesburg, London, Beijing, Moscow and fifty other major cities. Panic and riots ensued, but contrary to wide expectations, the Travelers didn't land, let alone destroy or conquer. They just . . . hovered. We were told the situation, and what the visitors offered. State by state, the citizens were allowed to vote on whether the Visitors could touch ground.

Demonstrations. Signs abounded. *"Hell no!"* or their equivalents in a dozen

languages.

Most places, that sentiment was almost universal. But a few . . . California for instance, said yes. And so, at last, aliens were among us. And again, they delivered on their promises, enabling those states to enjoy the bounty. The technology was tightly controlled, and only allowed into the areas that welcomed the Travelers. That was clever. We were both in control . . . and totally on the hook. Because everyone knew someone wasting away from some nasty ailment. Someone who was healed . . . or employed in one of the new industries that sprang up and became Google overnight. Within two years, there wasn't a country on Earth that denied them. Traveler tech created a hundred billionaires and a thousand multi-millionaires in the first year.

You rarely saw Travelers on the street. When you did, it was in those odd suits and usually in a limo of some kind, usually piloted by a live human being. They appeared on documentaries and news shows, and then entertainment as well. Television, billboards, films . . . break-dancing amoebas, torch song-warbling slime molds. Slowly we began to see these concoctions more often, associated with puppies and smiling children . . . and sexy men and women.

The Travelers wanted to see that humans were accepting them.

They masked their pheromones, poured themselves into better and better fabrications, and even managed to appear in a series of Indian films. I thought I recognized Elvis doing a very creditable Bollywood Bhangra dance. Hard to say.

All paramecia look alike to me.

• • • •

Among hundreds of others, Rhonda and I were released from our contracts—now that it was out in the open, *everyone* clamored to work with Them. And the Traveler technology was integrated into our entertainment with steadily increasing frequency and effect. Movies were immersive and hyper-real, more so than any 3D, hologram, Showscan, or anything that had ever existed previously. Somehow we reacted *more* to those images than the real thing. Amazing. Humanity was heading for a renaissance. I have to admit that I felt a little guilty. The Travelers had come a trillion miles looking for love, and didn't seem to understand the concept of prostitution. Before I left the facility, I had a final meeting with Elvis. He was squished into his exoskeleton, the pinkish indestructible Traveler-cloth "human" suit beneath his white sequined jumpsuit. I no longer felt the urge to vomit when I was around him. He'd changed his smell and appearance, and that sizzling sensation I got in his presence had died to a mere itch.

"Hello, Carver," he said. "Good to see you."

"And you."

"I think," he said, "That we've accomplished something wonderful together. Thank you."

He handed me a card. "What's this?

"A token of my appreciation. One million of your dollars."

There it was. Another six zeroes. It was true that a rising tide lifted all boats, that a certain amount of inflation had accompanied Traveler wealth, but Rhonda and I had been paid so well, we'd raced ahead of that curve. In that moment, I realized I never had to work again for the rest of my life. "Thank you!"

Elvis' face mask smiled. *"Thankyouverymuch."* His namesake's Vegas drawl. "Cheap at the price, old son."

• • • •

Six weeks after we left the Facility, I asked Rhonda to marry me, and a month later, she agreed. Our honeymoon was a revelation, as if our prior sex life had been a mere appetizer, and she'd given me the keys to the kitchen. If she had lived a hundred lives as a leather-clad courtesan, that might have explained the days and nights that followed, as she opened one door after another for me, allowed me to glimpse what was within until it felt like she was running an electrified tongue over my body's every exposed nerve. Then with a mischievous giggle she would close that door, give me just enough time to recover and then lead me staggering and wide-eyed to the next.

In retrospect, it was predictable that Rhonda would be the one to bring the fetish sites to my attention. Three months after we were married, she danced into my home office, touched my lips with hers and giggled. "Have I got something to show *you!"*

She led me to her office, where she worked so hard and late at night. Her computer was mostly used for graphics, but like the rest of us, she surfed the net to rest her brain in between creative spurts.

"I don't want to tell you how I found this site . . ."

"I think I can guess. Feeling a little frisky, were you?"

She turned the screen around, and for a moment my eyes didn't focus. Then I saw a very pale woman, gelatinously obese with very short, bristly dark hair, sporting animated tattoos that mimicked organelles. They shivered and danced, while three men stood around her performing what I believe what Japanese aficionados would refer to as a bukkake ritual. If you don't know what that is, look it up.

On the other hand, maybe you shouldn't. Ignorance is bliss.

"Is she trying to look like a Traveler?"

"Wild, huh?"

The sound was much too good for speakers their size. I didn't recognize the brand. "New speakers?"

"Nice, aren't they?" The speakers were flat as glass panes, but the sound was as good as a ten thousand-dollar pair of Naim Ovators. T-tech. Traveler music wafted in the background, and with the new speakers, my ears absorbed odd, previously undetected undertones.

"Wow," I said "That's really strange. It's a new world. That other stuff . . . wow."

She suddenly pulled in on herself, shrank a little, seemed tentative and a little shy. "Does it turn you on?" Her forefinger fluttered along my forearm.

"Shit. No. You?"

She shrugged, her finger ceasing its dance. "Maybe . . ."

"Well, we should take advantage of that . . ."

"I'm busy right now," Rhonda said, removing my hands. ". . . but save some of that heat for me tonight, okay?"

But . . . she worked until midnight, and when she did come to bed, she rolled over and went to sleep. That's marriage, I guess.

• • • •

More and more often, Rhonda seemed to be in a funk. I think we saw each other less frequently, pretty much devolving to roommates. It wasn't that we didn't love each other. It was that some critical spark was just . . . gone. She was doing more Traveler work, and the "bridging" was subtler. The T's had gifted us with a printing process that conveyed a dimensional and multi-sensory aspect. Strange. You would look at a picture, and detect a scent. If you weren't looking directly at it, you detected no smell. I have no idea how they did that, or how it worked, but it did.

Rhonda's office was filled with more and more of these Traveler materials. She seemed increasingly dreamy and far away. And then one summer day in 2036 Rhonda left the house, and stayed out late.

Very late.

And when Rhonda returned in the early morning, she seemed . . . dazed. Like someone thoroughly stoned, with a secretive smile that was too damned easy to interpret. She curled up on the couch with a dreamy expression and wouldn't talk to me. When I tried, she turned her face to the back of the couch and pretended to sleep. Finally, that night I brought her a tray of chicken wings, and set it down next to her. She smelled it. Turned, smiled faintly, but didn't speak, other than offer a very soft:

"Thank you."

At that moment, I was certain. "You did it, didn't you?"

She looked at me, hands shaking. Didn't answer.

"What was it like?" I asked.

She paused. Then her face softened, as I'd only seen in our deepest, most intimate moments. "I can't describe it," she said with an almost feverish intensity.

"Try," I said. And in that moment I saw something from her I'd never seen before, and never would again: a desperate desire for me to understand her, as if in understanding we would bond more deeply. But something about what she said reminded me less of someone inviting you to a party, and more like someone skydiving without a parachute, terrified of dying alone. "Think of the worst kiss you've ever had. Then . . . the best sex. Can you do that?"

I couldn't help but smile at how she trembled to say those words. "Okay. Then what?"

"The gap between them is like . . . what the Gray was like." She gripped my hands, nails digging into my flesh. "Come with me. Let's share this. Let's . . ." I guess that disgust is something I don't hide well. She saw it, and drew away, the momentary vulnerability evaporated. Just like that. Gone.

Her lips twisted with sudden, bitter force. "You're a coward."

We slept in the same bed for a while after that, but . . . well, you know. And then she moved into the guest room, and never returned to our room. There would have been no point. We had no guests, and she wasn't coming back to me.

• • • •

Ten years passed, one aching, disorienting day at a time. I had no need for earning money, but embraced busywork of many kinds, perhaps to distract myself from the unhappy fact that Rhonda and I had become mere roommates. Our sex life had dwindled to memories.

The world seemed to flow around me, like a stream dividing itself around a rock. I watched the fashions and culture slowly admit more and more Traveler imagery and influence, but little of it really seemed to break through my emotional cocooning. I had endless toys, and work, and that had to be enough.

Despite promises made in our empty bed I felt a certain nasty urge expanding inside me. Every time I heard Traveler music, that compulsion grew. When I watched movies with *very* special guest stars, something deep in my gut twitched. Like a tumor growing day by day right before your eyes, there is no single moment you can point to when you say, "Ah hah! It's cancer!" It sneaks up on you.

The scope of change was too large, the implications beyond sanity. And then one day, as Rhonda had known, the hunger sharpened from a whisper to a scream. I called an aircab and vaped in the back seat until my head spun. It dropped me off in the middle of nowhere and I walked randomly. Yeah, right. Pretended that I didn't know where I was going, finally ending up at one of the storefront enterprises they called a "friendship club." Paid my considerable fee, and entered. I'd had to get very, very stoned, loaded enough that some part of me knew I would have plausible deniability.

In an office paneled with stars and nebulae stenciled with obscene constellations, I met with a thin man who asked a battery of questions. I guess I answered them properly because I was taken to a shower room, where I was told to bathe. The water wasn't mere H_2O, it had a taste to it, a smell that faded, as if my nose had been numbed. And they led me to a dimmed room.

I wished I'd vaped a little more.

The room's only furniture was a black couch. And the door behind me was the only door, so I expected it to open, and for something else to enter. I felt myself dizzying as if the scented droplets evaporating on my flesh were seeping into my bloodstream. I needed

to sit down. Lay down.

And the moment I did, the "couch" engulfed me.

Followed immediately by a wave of panic. God! It wasn't a couch, it was the Traveler version of some kind of sex toy, some B&D playground, their version of leather and chains and whips and gag-balls. *No! I . . .*

And then I felt myself . . . embraced in every orifice. Welcomed. Hungered for. It was not love. Not sex. It was . . . the form for which all of those are shadows. The sound, and all the others merely echoes.

• • • •

When I awakened, I was alone in the room. The "couch" seemed just a couch again, although investigation revealed that it to be an exoskeleton, a costume, into which a Traveler had stuffed itself. I left the lust-chamber, walked out past the receptionist's glassy smile. A half-dozen other adventurers hunched dazedly in the foyer, shuddering like men who had stepped out of a sauna into freezing cold. We sat around, half-dressed, unable to speak . . . and sharing a knowledge.

When I vacated the premises, the street outside shimmered with pools of cottony light radiating from no source I could determine. I swore I wouldn't, but I turned around and returned to the friendship center and asked when I could go again. Months, they said. There was apparently a very long waiting list. I was told I could pay six figures to be placed at the head of that line. I'm sure Rhonda had. God help me, I considered. But . . . I just couldn't.

• • • •

Strange how separate threads twist together into a braid strong enough to hang you. How easy it is to rationalize. How proud I was of my tolerance for pain. And fear. Everything was going so well, I told myself. Life was just wonderful. I'd never been wealthy, and money is its own opiate. Perhaps the most powerful. You live in a kind of tunnel, insulated from most concerns. My health remained perfect, as They had promised. I was the same, but thirty years in the social effects were now more noticeable.

Boys and girls seemed to care little for differentiating themselves by dresses and pants, or long and short hair, or makeup . . . as if that aching boy-girl tension no longer mattered quite so much. Or at all. I remember a morning on a London street, when I witnessed a wan couple pushing a perambulator down along the Thames. Our eyes met, and they smiled at me. Hopeful smiles. I smiled back. And as I always had, I reflexively peered into the baby carriage.

The infant was perhaps three months old, and gazing out at the world with the kind of glazed uncertainty that seems standard on babies that age. When it looked at me, it started to cry. I'd always found that sound to trigger the urge to comfort. Instead . . . its ululation

was just irritating. It's smooth pale flesh seemed . . . grublike, and its bald head reminded me of my father, when he was dying of cancer in an Atlanta hospice. I recoiled, and the baby cried more loudly, and the parents pulled back into their shells and hurried away.

It was the only baby I'd seen for a week. The last one I saw for a month.

I saw fewer children on the streets, more shuttered and boarded-up schools. Humanity was so happy, so drunk on our new longer lives and endless nifty T-Tech that we just ignored what was happening around us.

As for me . . . I never had so much as a sniffle, and maintained beautiful muscle tone without doing so much as a push-up . . . but certain hungers seem to have quieted. Women passing on the street were often strikingly beautiful, but in a "healthy animal" way, not a matter of artifice or attraction. It was almost as if I was noticing their loveliness the way I might think a painting was lovely. Or a one-man sky-strider "walking" between clouds. Beautiful. Distant. Irrelevant to anything but a cool aesthetic appreciation.

Then one spring day in 2054, I was having Zavo at a local Starbucks. Oh, right. I've not told you about that. Zavo is the commercial name for a T-tech drink. I think they bioengineered it to not only sensitize your brain to norepinephrine, like caffeine does, but provide co-factors that allowed your little gray cells to manufacture that juice with scary efficiency. How you can make something that lasts all day, has no jitters, and lets you sleep is beyond me. But it does.

Good dreams, too. Vivid. Intense.

When I drank it, I dreamed of the space between the stars.

A ratty looking little Asian guy dropped onto the seat across from me. He stared at me, not moving, not speaking. Not blinking. "Do I know you . . .?" I finally asked.

"It hasn't been that long," he replied. "You haven't forgotten so much . . .?"

I skawed laughter. "Professor Watanabe! Man, it's been a long time." Hadn't seen him since our days at the Facility. He hadn't worn well. The Professor was well dressed, but he looked tense, like Atlas trying to be casual while holding the world on his shoulders. "You're doing well. We're all doing well."

"Travelers," he said.

A bubble car sailed by, a paramecium in the back seat, a superfluous human pretending to pilot a drone. Fashion statement. Professor Watanabe held my eyes with a smile, and slid over a silver thumb drive.

"What's this?" I asked. It looked antique, probably only holding a few terabytes.

"Something you need to look at. Tonight."

"What is it?"

"Just read it. The core document will take a few minutes. You could spend a year going through the supporting data. All you could want."

"But what . . .?"

"Open it. Remember my name, and open it."

Then, smile frozen on his face, Watanabe left the table. I turned the drive over and over again in a shaking hand.

What the hell?

• • • •

As I said, the drive was decades old. Not T-Tech, not even current technology. That should have been a clue. I dragged out an ancient laptop. Instructions scribbled on the side of the drive warned me to disable Wi-Fi before booting, and I did. It utilized an old fashioned USB connection. I actually had to visit a vintage computer shop to find a proper connection, making lame excuses to the salesman to explain why I wanted a device that had been obsolete for at least thirty years. When I returned home with my acquisition, it took me an hour to figure out how to patch the computer to the drive. When I finally succeeded, a password prompt appeared.

Password? The professor didn't give me—

Then I recalled his odd request: *"Remember my name."*

Was that it? I typed "Watanabe" in, and to my pleasant surprise, his face materialized.

"Greetings, Mr. Kofax," he said. As in the coffee shop, Watanabe's face was pale and drawn. Leeched of color and life. The problem was not his physical health, I was sure. The Travelers had made sure of that. It was something else. Something worse. "You must be wondering about why the cloak and dagger. Well, you aren't going to wonder for very long. I'm going to make this short, but I cannot make it sweet." He wiped his hand across his forehead, smearing a slick of perspiration. "I wish I could. The short version is: We made a mistake, Carver. You and I. We were the heroes, remember? We figured it out. Well, I should have stuck with teaching, and you should have stuck to flogging soap."

"Why?" I muttered.

"Why? Because we've done our job too well. Something is going wrong. Human beings aren't having much sex anymore. Not with each other, at least. The mistake was thinking that when the Travelers told us they could not lie, they were offering every implication of their actions. They were honest, but not . . . forthcoming."

"What are you talking about?" I muttered. For the second time, it was as if he heard me, or had anticipated my thoughts.

"What I mean is that we figured everything was safe, because we evaluated how Traveler tech affected us. Their music, for instance. Played through our equipment, we found nothing to worry about. But then we began to upgrade our systems, using *their* tech, and frankly we failed to continue testing as carefully as we should. Traveler tech increased the bandwidth. They've given us biological, optical, computational, and auditory technology, and we paid too much attention to how powerful it was, and not enough to how it all interlocked. How, once assembled, it would have emergent properties."

"Meaning what?"

This was some kind of video AI program. Even coming over an obsolete thumb drive, somehow it was still responding to me. Try as the Professor had to avoid it, Traveler

tech's tendrils were everywhere. "Meaning that we gave them access to our hardware and software . . . and wetware, Carver. And they are reprogramming us."

"How? To do what?"

"Birthrates are dropping. It's happening faster and faster. Twenty percent reduction throughout the world, and no one panicked, because no one is complaining. We've gone numb somehow. We're just . . . not servicing each other."

It . . . was true. Rhonda and I hadn't had sex in over a decade, and I hadn't really considered the implications. And kids? We'd never talked . . .

No, that's not true. Once upon a time, we'd talked about having babies. We both came from large families, both loved our brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews . . . how unlikely was it that neither of us would hanker for kids?

"Carver, you need to look at the data. This isn't accidental, and it isn't local. This is greatest catastrophe in the history of our species. An extinction level event."

He said more, but it was much the same, except for a request that I meet with him, secretively, in a week's time.

A week. Time to research, to sift through the mountain of data on that drive. Time to think, and decide.

So . . . I looked. I slept perhaps three hours a night, barely eating or drinking, drunk with terror.

The data was incontrovertible.

For reasons no one understood, the Traveler effect was growing. Human beings were becoming more attracted to the aliens than we were to each other. Once you opened your eyes, the whole thing was obvious. I guess it was just that they were so . . . far beyond ugly that the idea they were some kind of competitive threat was absurd. You just couldn't take the notion seriously. But something had functioned like cosmic beer goggles.

And another terrible thing: My brain said to scream what I'd learned from the rooftops, to find some way to stop this, to crush them all. But another part of me (and I know how sick this sounds) felt *protective* of the Travelers. More so than I did of actual human children. Just as the data suggested. Show me a picture of one of the gelatinous oozing masses, and I felt like I had a lapful of warm kittens. Look at a picture of a bubbly brown-skinned baby, and all I could see was Louis Armstrong dipped in thirty-weight.

I blinked, and shook my head, and considered.

I couldn't talk to Rhonda. Dared not. Our bank account suggested she had paid almost a quarter-million dollars to be part of an exclusive "friendship" club, getting serviced once a week. On what world could I trust her?

Certainly not this one.

The phone rang.

"So have you read through everything?" Dr. Watanabe asked.

"Yes," I said. "What are we going to do?"

• • • •

I had been welcomed into a circle of rebels, all men and women Watanabe trusted. We met secretly in the professor's home, and discussed our quandary. Did we publicize and risk losing our window of opportunity? Careful overtures to seats of power had been rebuffed. We decided upon action.

There was a central media node in central Dallas where alien music and images were inserted in television, vids, and neural feeds. You've probably read the reports, or saw the trial, one of several triggered by similar actions around the globe. Ours was merely the first. I won't drag you through the overly familiar details, but here are the most critical:

The node was the repository of a vast river of information constantly streamed over multiple channels, probably including those ripples in space-time, the secrets we had coveted enough to ignore the risks of unknown technology. Watanabe reasoned that if we could destroy it, perhaps people would awaken from the trance we had helped induce.

As you know if you watch the news, we were successful getting in, planting our devices. The bomb exploded, killing Professor Watanabe, a woman named Courtney Pickett, and two watchmen. But . . . the brain, the core of the facility itself, survived.

The police swooped in, loyal to their Traveler masters. There was no place to hide. We never had a chance to get away. The police had us before we could reach our nests or hidey-holes. It was almost as if they had known in advance, as if they wanted a terrorist act to use as an example. As if . . .

Rhonda.

She had hacked my computer. Rhonda, my loving wife. Wearing makeup that made her skin shimmer with translucence, revealing the succulent meat beneath.

My wife. My love. My betrayer.

The trial was short and sensational. My lawyers were the best that Traveler money could buy. I got the death penalty. Rhonda testified against me, her face a fish tank of gliding paramecium. The human judge wore silvery Traveler makeup, so that the inside of her head looked like a jar of winking cat's eyes.

I was screwed.

When Rhonda left the courthouse on that last day, she never looked back.

That's really all there is to say. They're coming now. I thought I'd have more time. Everyone does.

• • • •

Two guards and a sad-faced minister in dark pants and shirt escorted Carver Kofax from his cell. He had been afraid for so long that he now felt only emptiness, as if the extreme emotion had hollowed him out.

"Are you ready, my son?" the priest asked. "Our father, who art in heaven, vanguard of our Traveling friends and saviors. . ."

"You've got to be kidding me," Carver muttered.

The death chamber was steel walls and a steel seat with clamps for his legs and arms. "Any last words?" the executioner asked after the shackles were snapped into place. On his neck, a Traveler tattoo crawled and beckoned lasciviously. Kofax swallowed back a sour taste. All the fear that had been hiding somewhere in the back of his head exploded to life, and he bucked against his restraints.

"This isn't right," Carver screamed. "You're making a mistake. We're all making a mistake—"

The executioner had left the chamber, sealed the door behind him. Vents at the floor level began to hiss, and greenish wisps of gas puffed out, pooled around his feet, and began to rise. He coughed, vomited, made one final convulsive push against the shackles, and then collapsed.

His vision slid to black.

And then . . . nothing.

• • • •

I can't believe I'm writing this. It shouldn't be possible, but then, so many things have changed in what used to be "our" world.

Sparkles of light. I blinked. And opened my eyes.

White walls, humming machines of unknown design. But the humans standing over the bed, an East Indian and a coarse, chunky-looking pale blond woman, both wore medicinal white. "Where am I?" My throat felt dry and raw. It hurt even to whisper. Was this hell? Wasn't I dead?

"Wrong question," the doctor said. His skin and subcutaneous fat were translucent, his organs sparkling in his meat bag. Some kind of light-bending makeup, no doubt.

"What's the right question?"

"When are you?"

That made no sense, but I played along. "All right. When am I?"

"It is 2105. You've been gone for fifty years."

My mind went blank. "What the hell . . .? I . . . I . . ."

"I know. You thought you were dead. But you can thank the Travelers for that. They don't kill, even when you transgress against them. They just . . . put you aside for a time."

• • • •

After I checked out of the hospital, I discovered that my bank account had been gaining interest for half a century, and now contained more than I could ever spend. There were also fewer people to help me spend it. The decrease in population was noticeable. The streets were almost empty, as if everyone were indoors watching a parade. The few human beings I saw scuttled along the concrete like lonely crabs, ancients in young bodies, morbidly afraid of their good health, of the vibrancy that would turn into sudden

death without warning. That was what the Travelers promised, yes? Perfect health until death.

And of course, they didn't lie.

I saw no children at all.

Quietly, without any fuss, the Travelers were taking over the world. Not a shot fired.

• • • •

Rhonda still lived in our penthouse. When she appeared on the vid screen she was . . . strange. She had aged another fifty years, but other than tight, shiny skin and eyes drowned in fear and fatigue, on first look she hadn't changed much. The second and third looks told a different story. It was difficult to put my finger on precisely what was disturbing. Was it makeup? Surgery? Not sure. But it was almost as if she was some alien creature pretending humanity, as if there was nothing left of Rhonda at all.

"Carver?" she said, and in that moment her shock and surprise gave human animation to the mask of gelid flesh surrounding those mad eyes. "But . . . you're dead!"

Damn. Had no one told her? I explained what had happened to me. At first she was in shock, but in time, guilt and relief mingled on her face. "You . . . you're so *ugly."* She cried for a moment, then wiped the tears away. I was hideous to her. Because I looked human. But so did she, at least on the surface. So some part of her had fought to remain human, even as another part had grown increasingly repulsed by that very thing.

Suddenly, the impact of what had happened really hit me. My knees buckled, and the world spun and darkened before I regained my balance. "I . . . oh, God. What did you do?"

"I . . . I'm old, Carver, but I still want to be touched. I'm too human for most people now. I should have had more operations, more implants, but I just couldn't." Her face twisted with self-loathing and something else, the barest touch of hope. "Has it been a long time for you? We could . . . I have virtual lenses I could wear. It would make you look . . . we could . . ."

"Fifteen spice tuna roll," I said.

"What?" her mouth hung slack, and beneath the mask of youth, I saw an old, old woman.

"Sometimes," I said, "you just have to know when to quit."

I hung up.

I had the money and time to travel, and did. It didn't matter what I said or did, not any longer. I wasn't censored or inhibited in any way. Things had progressed too far. Whatever the Travelers had done to humanity had taken hold. What few young people stumbled through the cities seemed pale, genderless ghosts floating through a concrete graveyard. Earth's cities were clean but sparsely occupied, and in the country, one could drive for miles and never glimpse a human face.

I did see human couples from time to time. One or two a month. It was good to know

that whatever the Travelers had done was not 100% effective. Just . . . 99.9%.

I found myself laughing for no apparent reason. A lot.

I think I was afraid that if I ever stopped, I'd kill myself.

• • • •

On leaving the hospital, I'd been given a plastic bag containing my possessions, along with a key to a storage locker where Rhonda had sent the majority of my possessions. One day after returning from one of my lonely trips, I wandered to the fenced facility and spent a few hours digging through the detritus of a remarkable, accursed life. Here was a bit of my childhood . . . there a photograph from our Barbados honeymoon. There a set of notes from some college assignment I could no longer remember. And bundles of old clothes. I rifled the pockets of a coat, and out fell a business card.

I bent, picked it up, and read it. Twice. And then, almost as if my lips were moving by themselves, I spoke the number and a circuit opened. The conversation was short, but enthusiastic. Within seconds a car hovered down from the sky and its door slid open.

The ride took about twelve minutes, and covered the distance from Los Angeles to a two-story white mansion in Whitehaven on the outskirts of Memphis. The airdrone deposited me on the lawn. I rang the doorbell, finger shaking.

Elvis answered the front door. He was as recognizable as ever, an amoeba in a rhinestone suit.

"Howdy there, Carver. How's it shakin'?" His translation equipment had not only improved, but had mastered the local drawl.

"I, uh . . . I guess I'm a little surprised . . ." So he, or It (or *they.* What the hell did I really know?), had purchased The King's cottage. Hardly surprising. Travelers could pretty much have anything they wanted.

"That ah like this form? You thought ah was kidding?"

"No," I said. I felt like my bones were made of sand. "I guess I didn't."

"We don't lie."

"No, you don't." There was something so ridiculous, so cosmically absurd about the gelatinous form in the white sequins, gliding on a mucous trail through a pop-culture mausoleum, that the occasion was almost solemn. "You fit here," I said. "I guess you learned from us, too."

"It goes both ways," Elvis said. "A little."

Videos of *Jailhouse Rock* and *Viva Las Vegas,* a garage filled with vintage cars and halls swathed in platinum records. Elvis talked non-stop, as if he had memorized a billion factoids about a singer dead for more than a century, someone whose hip-shaking melodies must have traveled a trillion miles before reaching whatever the Travelers used instead of ears. The tour ended in a den dominated by an empty fireplace pointing out this or that artifact, including a certificate signed by Richard Nixon and the head of the DEA, presented to Elvis Aaron Presley on December 21, 1970 authorizing him as a "Federal

Agent at Large," whatever the hell *that* meant.

I shook myself out of my trance. "How many times have you done this?" I said in the smallest voice I had ever heard emerge from my throat.

"Toured people through Graceland?"

"No." I gestured vaguely. "This. What you did to us."

"What you did to yourselves. Oh, no one really knows. You call us Travelers, but we're really more like traders. Sex isn't universal. But there's always something people want. Your media images showed you to be both attracted and repelled by sex, and by strangeness, and that gave us our opportunity."

I plopped down on the couch, finally feeling the weight of my frozen years. At least I thought it was a couch. It didn't molest me, anyway. "So it's . . . just over for us? For the human race?"

"Not totally," Elvis said, and somehow a twitch of his protoplasm resembled a sneering lip. "The crèches will keep pumping you guys out. Humans are fun. Entertaining. I mean . . . we don't hate you or anything. So please, live out the rest of a long, long life. What wonders you will see! You're walking history, you know. And . . . we owe it all to you." The creature turned, the organelles floating within the transparent sack very much like a swarm of anxious eyes. They even narrowed in something I interpreted as regret, or concern. "You're angry. I can tell. I understand," he said. "And I'm sorry."

Elvis paused. "Say: I know," he brightened. "Want to fuck?"

I stared in disbelief, sputtering and trying to . . . trying to. . .

"Oh," I finally sighed. "What the hell."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Barnes is a bestselling, award-winning screenwriter and novelist from Los Angeles. He has written over 20 novels, and worked on shows such as *The Outer Limits, Stargate SG-1,* and *Baywatch*. His true love is teaching balance and enhancing human performance in all forms: emotional, professional, and physical. He is a life coach, Circular Strength Training coach, and certified hypnotist, as well as a trained yoga instructor, Tai Chi instructor, and fourth-degree black belt.

Omoshango

Dayo Ntwari | 9,700 words

Kainji Dam, Niger State, Nigeria, 1991

The rain pummelled the shivering twin girls as they hurried along the muddy path back to their mother's hut. The midwife had sent them to get the biggest pot they had and fill it with boiling water. Their nine-year-old hands struggled to maintain their grip on the slippery handles. As usual during rainstorms, the power was out and the entire village was in darkness. Except during the occasional flashes of lightning, the two girls could barely see each other. Side by side, they skidded and shuffled towards the hut, where their mother's tormented screams pierced the storm. The flashes in the thunderous night teased glimpses of the path ahead.

"Slow down, now, Kehinde! You are going too fast, jor!" Taiwo yelled. Kehinde squinted through the rain at her sister.

"Can't you hear Mummy shouting?" Kehinde yelled back, almost choking on the horizontal rain, "And they said we should do quick!"

The strap from her second rubber slipper snapped, leaving her now completely barefoot.

"And if you pour the hot water on us?" Taiwo cried, "What will you tell Mummy, again?" Taiwo wiped rain from her eyes in a useless gesture. She was the older of the twins, only by two minutes, but it was enough for her to feel responsible for her "little" sister Kehinde.

The earth beneath their feet began to tremble. The twins shrieked and gripped the pot with all the strength the girls could muster.

"WHAT IS THAT?" Taiwo and Kehinde shouted out simultaneously, looking down, looking at each other, and looking down again.

"TAIWO! KEHINDE!" the midwife's daughter, standing in the doorway, bellowed at them in reprimanding impatience. The wind threatened to rip the door from the young girl's hands. The twins were about to get moving again when a volley of lightning struck the hut. Six blasts in rapid succession. The roof exploded in a ball of fire that was quickly swallowed up by the rainstorm. The twins screeched, and Taiwo threw up her hands to shield her eyes from the blaze. The pot poured all over Kehinde's legs, and she howled as she fell in the mud. Taiwo's eyes were fixed on what appeared to be a baby, rising from the hut into the sky.

"Kehinde, look!"

Flashes of lightning illuminated glistening black feathers. Kehinde saw wings. It had wings! It was an infant with long wings beating against the rainstorm. It rose higher and higher until finally they lost sight of it.

Taiwo lowered her hands. She coughed and spat out rainwater. Only now did she notice Kehinde writhing in the mud, clutching her legs. The midwife's daughter was

hysterical.

"KEHINDE!" Taiwo struggled to pull her sister up. The ground was still trembling and they stumbled into the hut. Inside, their mother lay dead on a mattress. Her thighs and the sheets were soaked in blood that was being washed away by the rain crashing in, now that the hut was open to the sky. The trembling increased. Taiwo eased her barely conscious twin sister to the floor, propping her against the wall. Mama Sade. She had to get Mama Sade. Taiwo rushed out of the hut.

The ground jerked underneath her feet. Taiwo's little arms lashed out into darkness in a vain attempt to break her fall. Her face was covered in mud and she could taste blood in her mouth. Right above her elbow, a piece of bone jutted out. Behind her, something roared through the forest. Turning over, she wiped the mud from her eyes. The thing was knocking down trees older than her dead grandmother. It was coming straight for her. Taiwo was crying now as she squinted into the dark. Her fingers dug into the mud as the world rocked violently. Lightning flooded her eyes. A wall of muddy water was ferociously churning trees, cows, people. Her mother's hut disintegrated. Seconds later, the impact. The dam must have broken, she thought, as she tumbled and tumbled, drowning in the deluge.

• • • •

Two days later

{{ . . . heavy rains continue, bringing to a standstill rescue efforts around the collapsed Kainji dam, and putting further pressure on the Nigerian government as it struggles to restore electricity to major parts of the country. }}

• • • •

Dideolu nudged his way through the throng in the Emergency ward. A young doctor and two policemen faced off against a furious crowd trying to get their injured loved ones admitted.

"Excuse me," Dideolu said to the nurse at the reception desk. She had one ear pressed to a walkie-talkie and the other plugged by her acrylic fingernail. The lights in the ward flickered.

"Nurse, excuse me, please." Dideolu leaned across the reception desk and reached a hand out towards her. The rumbling of the generator suddenly ceased and the hospital's lights went out. An exasperated *AAAAAHHH* rang out from the crowd. Rainy daylight coming from the entrance cast an eerie gloom over the room. The ceiling fans slowed to a halt and despite the weather outside, the temperature inside the overcrowded room rose quickly.

Someone had torn the doctor's coat in the struggle and the two policemen were now embroiled in a fistfight with an elderly man. The generator roared back to life. Seconds

later the lights came back on, to cheers from the crowd. A door down the hall burst open and a squad of riot police armed with AKs, clubs, and electrical cables fashioned into whips bolted towards the doctor and the two police, who were fighting off the crowd.

"Finally," the nurse hissed and tossed the walkie-talkie on the desk. The police whips hissed through the air. The crowd was being pushed back, and somebody tripped and fell. Cries of pain followed the shouted orders from the riot police.

"Nurse." Dideolu tried again. Her glare bored into his weary eyes. She softened when she saw the two fifty-naira bills he pushed across the desk.

"Kehinde Ibidokun. Which room is she in?"

• • • •

Dideolu pulled a handkerchief from his jacket pocket. The stench in the ward was unbearable. The open windows and spinning ceiling fans merely swirled it around. Groans and whimpers floated by him as he slid past bed after bed. A young woman with exhaustion dripping from her eyes reached out to the nurse from the reception desk, "Nurse, nurse. When are they bringing the mosquito net, please?"

"Do you have mosquito net in your house?" the nurse hissed. She looked at Dideolu and pointed to a bed crammed in the corner, underneath the broken TV hanging from the ceiling. She turned and left him standing there. There was a table at the foot of the bed. One of its legs would plock-plock on the tiles whenever someone lifted the electric kettle. A line of people waited for the next round. Dideolu moved past the queue to the girl in heavy bandages.

With her one eye that wasn't swollen shut, she watched the electric kettle hiss and bubble a few inches from her feet. A woman reached for the kettle and poured the hot water into a mug. A hard yet gentle hand clasped Kehinde's left shoulder, and she turned her face upwards.

"Kehinde. How are you?"

She didn't recognize this man who knew her name. And he didn't look like a doctor. If he had been, then all these people in the ward would have mobbed him, begging for medical attention for their sick and wounded family members. But no one paid any attention to this man. He did not smile with his eyes, only with his teeth. And yet he looked worried when he asked how she was doing, as if it really mattered to him.

"I'm fine, thank you, sir," Kehinde replied, and started coughing. Dideolu pulled a bag from inside his jacket.

"See what I brought for you, Kehinde," he said, negotiating his weight on the edge of the bed. He took out a plastic bottle of juice, and two egg rolls. He twisted open the bottle and offered it to her. The little girl looked at the bottle, then back at him. She thought of what her mother had always told them about strangers. Kehinde pursed her lips to stifle another coughing fit, but her lungs betrayed her. Each cough sent pain jolting through her body. Dideolu helped her sit up and put the bottle to her lips. Nausea washed over

Kehinde as the orange juice washed away her thirst. Her nose wrinkled with annoyance as she watched her fingers trembling around the bottle. She tilted her head back, drinking it all down. Maybe he was a friend of her mother's? Then it would be safe to drink this. The man didn't seem to hear the rumbling coming from Kehinde's tummy as he unwrapped an egg roll and handed it to her.

"Is that better?" Dideolu asked after she had settled down again, and the little girl nodded through her weariness. He plucked the empty bottle and wrappers from her sheets. Dideolu's eyes wandered around in search of a bin. He stuffed the trash into the bag and slipped it back into his jacket. He allowed himself to relax a bit. The little girl did not seem to be in critical condition. She would probably live. It was a miracle, really. That close to the dam. Dideolu checked his watch and leaned towards her.

"My name is Doc . . ." He paused and shook his head almost imperceptibly. No point confusing her with his Ph.D. title. After all, he wasn't a medical doctor, was he?

"I mean, you can call me Uncle Gbenga. I went to school with your mother. We are friends." Dideolu studied her face. Had anyone bothered to tell her she had lost her entire family, mother, and twin sister, to the flood? The little girl nodded. Her good eye swung to the table as the electric kettle started wheezing again.

"Kehinde, do you remember what happened in your village?" Dideolu held his breath. The girl cast her eye down. She lay there, picking at the bandages around her thighs. Tears rolled down her cheek.

"My mummy and my sister died in the water," she sobbed and turned her face to the wall. Dideolu gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

"It's okay, my dear. Don't worry. Everything will be fine. You hear? Everything is going to be fine," he nodded when she turned back to look at him.

"I will take you from this place. This is not a good hospital. You don't have to stay here, my child."

The girl sniffled.

"Kehinde, listen carefully. I will help you. You can stay with me and everything will be okay." Dideolu stared into her eye. "But I need your help. Can you help me, my dear?" He saw confusion rising on her face. He checked his watch again, and the muscles in his temples twitched. He leaned forward and the girl shrank back.

"Do you remember what happened when your mother died, my child? Please try to remember," he urged. Kehinde's gaze went past him to the ceiling, as if caught in a daydream. He felt her fingers dig into his palm. She was shaking.

"You remember, don't you, Kehinde?" Dideolu nodded eagerly, "Tell me. Tell me everything."

• • • •

Badagry, Lagos State, Nigeria, present day

The young lady with the dark red eyepatch looked at the security monitor by the door,

her fingers still dancing across the keyboard. The monitor showed the professor's face looking into the security camera outside. She stopped typing and cleared her throat.

"Havoc. Deactivate front door security and unlock for Prof. Dideolu." Two rapid beeps rang out from the speakers embedded in the ceiling, followed by a metallic click signalling the unlocking of the door. Dideolu shut the door behind him and groaned as he heaved his suitcase onto the only free space on the table cluttered with power tools, electronic meters, cabling, and gutted mechanical and electronic parts. Dideolu took in the chaos and frowned.

"Kehinde. How many times have I asked you to clean up this mess? Your toys are everywhere."

"And how many times have I told you, they're not toys, Uncle Gbenga?"

Dideolu shook his head and opened his suitcase.

"I confirmed five more today," he said, handing Kehinde a thumb drive.

"Five? How long have you . . .?" Her head spun to face the window, "Oh, I didn't realize it was already night," she mumbled.

"Should I even bother asking whether you have had anything to eat today?" Dideolu asked, an eyebrow raised in doubt. Kehinde glanced at the plantain chips wrappers.

"Never mind," Dideolu said, waving the thumb drive at her. Kehinde took it and plugged it into her laptop. She scrolled through the document. Her forehead creased and she paused.

"There's one here who is almost six years old, Uncle G. That makes no sense. How the hell did he survive so long?"

"I found him on the outskirts of Ibadan. His mother had been disguising him as a hunchback," Dideolu replied, "It's quite clever, really."

"Except for the fact that the growth rate of their wings accelerates from age six!" Kehinde countered, "How come he didn't reveal this one sooner?" Kehinde looked back at the boy's file, shaking her head in bewilderment.

"Shango reveals them in due time. Mind how you talk about Him, Kehinde."

"You know what happens to these children if we don't get them out of their communities in time!" she shot back.

"Kenny—"

"And what happens when you get mixed up in that, Uncle G? You want them to throw a tire around your neck?"

"Calm down, Kehinde," Dideolu said, and waved her down, "How long have we been doing this? Has Shango not always protected us?"

"Abeg, Uncle G, forget that one. This is risky, jor. Ah ah!" Kehinde scowled. She typed in her user name, Ketu, and logged into their encrypted chat network.

KETU: How far? The farmer don bring 5 baskets today. You fit take the tomato go market before morning?

GORIMAPA: How things?

KETU: Things dey OK. Nuttin dey happen. You go carry the tomato reach market

before morning?

GORIMAPA: Why you wan rush? Wetin dey with the tomato?

KETU: Nuttin, sha. Na just one of the basket wey the tomato don old, small.

GORIMAPA: Old, ke? How old, na?

KETU: Like six days, sha. Na why I wan make e reach market quick quick. You get? Before e spoil.

GORIMAPA: 6 days, ke. Wetin the farmer talk?

KETU: No mind am. Help me with the baskets, Gori. Abeg.

GORIMAPA: No wahala. I go sort am. As per normal, now. But you go add money for night runs o. You know how things be.

KETU: No wahala. Later.

GORIMAPA: Later.

Kehinde logged out, shut down her laptop, stuffed it in her backpack, and grabbed her keys. She moved as close to the doorway of the shrine as she was allowed to. Inside, Dideolu was squatting in front of an open cabinet.

"The transport has been arranged, Uncle G," she called through the doorway. "But they need a risk bonus, since it's going to be a night trip."

Dideolu squinted and gritted his teeth, trying to focus on the rituals. There was a pen and an open notepad next to him on the floor. From where she stood, Kehinde could see he had already written down two more names. She rolled her eyes and turned to leave.

"I hope your shrine visit yields younger candidates this time. Good night, Uncle G."

• • • •

Like most nights, there was no power in her area. Kehinde's street was filled with the blaring of generators so loud they almost drowned out her dog Zuki, who capered and barked as her key rattled in the gate. Kehinde, the panting Zuki at her side, walked along the wooden fence which separated the one-bedroom annex she lived in from the compound's main building. On the other side of the fence, her landlord's wife was leaning against the bars of their bedroom window. Kehinde cursed under her breath.

"Kehinde? Is that you?" Clearly the four-foot fence was not high enough to conceal Kehinde's five foot five inches. She sighed and turned to the heavyset woman, who was retying her wrapper around her chest.

"Yes, ma. It's me. Good evening, ma."

"Evening, ke? Is it still evening?" the landlord's wife asked, "What says the time?" Her tone of voice grated Kehinde.

The time says it's time for you to shut up and sleep, Kehinde grumbled to herself. Zuki gave a bark.

"It's quarter to midnight, ma," Kehinde said, with all the politeness she could muster, the darkness concealing the aggravation on her face.

"When will you marry, Kehinde? Hm?" the older woman asked. The same question

every day.

"Soon, ma. I will marry soon," Kehinde's jaw clenched at the last word.

"Is okay. There's no need to be rude," the landlord's wife appealed, "In fact, I know it's not easy. With your condition, you know?" The woman motioned at Kehinde's eyepatch. Kehinde's hands balled into fists.

"Don't worry, Kehinde. God will find an understanding man for you," she assured, "Let me pray for you, my daughter." The landlord's wife raised her hands through the window. Kehinde hated when people like that called her "my daughter." Her mother had been killed twenty-five years ago today. She was nobody's daughter.

"Yes, ma," Kehinde lowered her head. Zuki peered up at her, tail wagging, whimpering with impatience.

"Father God, in the mighty name of Jesus, for the sake of my daughter Kehinde . . . ," the woman started. Kehinde's fingers stroked Zuki's fur. The landlord's wife's litany and the cacophonous Lagos night were slowly being muted by the fog of her wandering thoughts.

• • • •

The light from her landlord's perimeter lamp cast long shadows in Kehinde's otherwise dark room. Kehinde sat down, clamped her lips around a joint, and lit it. The dog had been fed and fell asleep half an hour later.

• • • •

Kehinde squeezed the butt of her fourth joint into the ash pile in the rusty Peak evaporated milk tin. She undid the knot that held her hair back in a ponytail. Her thin dreadlocks cascaded around her shoulders and halfway down her back. She sat in the humid room, tracing a finger along the razor's edge. It was around three in the morning, and most of the generators in the neighbourhood had fallen quiet. She could hear the mosquitoes, now. Kehinde got up and walked over to the bed and eased herself down on the mattress. She took off her deep red eyepatch and chucked it on the nightstand. It had been her sister Taiwo's favourite colour. For a moment, Kehinde sat with her hands resting on her scarred thighs. She was listening to the mosquitoes, feeling the bites. Her eyes drifted shut, then fluttered open. Her chest rose. She exhaled.

She lifted her t-shirt up, exposing her lower torso. With the razor in her right hand, below her armpit, Kehinde carved a groove, starting next to the twenty-four scars from the previous years, down and across her ribs to the centre of where she could feel her heart crunching against her chest.

Kehinde let go of her t-shirt, and felt the blood trickling down. She wiped the razor off on her sheets and dropped it back inside her nightstand. Zuki rustled in her sleep. And then all was silent again. Just the breathing and the mosquitoes. She closed her wet eyes,

and reminded herself to put the bedsheets and t-shirt in the laundry basket before she went back to the lab in the morning.

• • • •

GORIMAPA: The tomatoes reach market this morning.
KETU: Nice one. Any problem?
GORIMAPA: At all. Even the old tomato still dey, no problem.
KETU: OK, thanks. I dey busy today. Nuff things to do, as you know, sha.
GORIMAPA: Yeah, one small problem, sha.
KETU: Wetin again? You no talk say no problem?
GORIMAPA: E be like say you never hear. Skip to 13:02.

Kehinde clicked on the YouTube link he sent her. She skipped past the celebrity gossip segment. And then she saw it. Superimposed on the screen was a picture of a man carrying a baby wrapped in a blanket to a pick-up truck. Kehinde's eyes widened at the paused clip.

"UNCLE G! UNCLE G! COME, COME, COME!" Kehinde screamed. Dideolu tore open the door to the lab.

"Jesus Christ! What is the matter, Kehinde? Ah ah!" his hands fell to his sides in bemusement. Behind him, sitting on an examination table, was a young man wearing an oxygen mask. He had sensors stuck to his torso and head. A lab assistant peeked from behind the young man's folded wings.

"Somebody took your picture!" Kehinde snapped, stabbing her finger at her laptop screen.

"What?" Dideolu handed a device to his lab assistant and rushed over to her desk. Kehinde pointed at the picture. Dideolu gasped. The picture showing the baby in his arms, wrapped in a dirty blanket, also showed a wing tip poking out from under the blanket. Kehinde clicked Play.

{{ *. . . sent in by one of our viewers, showing what is purported to be angel baby, and . . .* }}

{{ *No no, I don't think it's an angel. We all know angels don't have black wings. Angels are white. That is, their wings are white.* }}

{{ *Maybe this is a devil baby?* }}

Both presenters laughed.

Kehinde's eye bore into his temple, and finally Dideolu looked at her.

"I was careful. You know I'm always careful," he stuttered. "And moreover, they are not taking it seriously!"

{{ *Let's now take our first caller, welcome to The Morning Gist, please introduce yourself, caller.* }}

{{ *Yes, my name is Pastor Samuel Obioha, from Victory & Miracle Apostolic Church, at Mobolaji Estate, Gbagada.* }}

{{ *Good morning, Pastor. Please, what is your take on this picture of the, well, is it angel baby, is it devil baby . . .?* }} asked the first presenter, a smirk on his face.

{{ *I think it's photoshopped!* }} interjected his co-host.

{{ *Is not a Photoshop o! This is not a Photoshop, my daughter! This picture is confirmed real!* }} the pastor insisted. {{ *Do you understand? What you are seeing here, what you are seeing in this picture is the problem with Nigeria. You see, . . .* }}

{{ *What problem is that, Pastor?* }} interrupted the host, elbowing his colleague.

{{ *The problem is all these fake pastors engaging in witchcraft. Using black magic to steal people's money. You understand? That is the problem of Nigeria. These are evil people with corrupted minds, I mean can you imagine? Can you imagine they are saying that they are flying babies to Heaven??* }}

{{ *AAAAHHHH, PASTOOOOOR!!!* }} The two hosts bumped against each other, laughing.

{{ *See, see, see!* }} the pastor shouted. {{ *This is not a laughing matter. You hear? These people are . . .* }} The line went dead.

{{ *Hello? Hello, Pastor? Hello?* }} called the host, trying to compose himself.

{{ *Looks like we lost him,* }} said the co-host. {{ *Anyway, dear viewers, this is Morning Gist. Call the number on your screen and share with us, this morning, your thoughts on this picture of angels and demons. And the seventh caller wins a brand new —* }}

Kehinde closed the browser tab.

"We continue as planned," Dideolu's voice was firm, "He's almost ready. All readings are normal, and we are just testing the transmitters, Kehinde. What is the status of the micro drone?"

For a moment, Kehinde glared at the professor. Then she shook her head and brought up the live feed from the drone she had deployed in the morning.

"The signal strength is within the nominal range, but we are not doing this from here," she answered.

"What? What do you mean?" Dideolu asked.

"Everything except Havoc is portable, but I can set up a downlink from Havoc to my laptop. That's no problem. We just can't do the launch from the roof any more, Uncle G."

"Why not? There is no risk. This is the only structure in the area, the rest is farmland owned by the Institute," Dideolu's retort sounded weak even in his own ears, and was no match for the resolve in Kehinde's eyes.

"Exactly, Uncle. There is nobody out here but us." She went on, "And when we go up on the roof to send a guy with an eight-metre wingspan flying off into orbit, which compound will they search first?" Dideolu helped her pull road cases from under the workstation.

"8.73 metres, actually."

"What?" Kehinde turned to the young man sitting on the examination table. Abiona glanced behind himself and slowly stretched out his jet-black wings. He looked back at

Kehinde. “My wingspan is 8.73 metres. Prof measured them again yesterday,” he beamed.

• • • •

“We still need it to be secluded enough for privacy. Turn left here,” Dideolu told the driver as the truck raced down the dirt road towards the beach. They pulled over on a patch of sand a few metres from the shore. Dideolu got out of the passenger seat and walked to the rear of the truck, where his assistant was preparing Abiona. The professor wrung his hands. He took out his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from Abiona’s body.

“Abiona, how are you feeling?” Dideolu asked.

“I’m fine, Prof. We are ready,” Abiona replied, rolling his shoulders, causing his wings to ruffle against each other. Dideolu’s hand trembled as he tucked his handkerchief back into his lab coat.

“Kehinde.” He walked past the two men to where she sat.

“Everything is set, Uncle. The downlink from Havoc and the micro drone stream are stable.”

“Good, good, good. Okay . . . Good,” Dideolu swallowed.

“I’m going to send up another micro drone to monitor the perimeter,” Kehinde continued, pointing at the crow perched on one of the road cases. The bird cocked its head to get a better look at Dideolu, and the professor’s face showed up on the monitor at Kehinde’s terminal.

“I just need to feed it and run another quick systems check before I send it up,” Kehinde said. She took out a satchel of dried fish chunks and beckoned the crow. The bird landed on her desk and let out a caw. Kehinde held out her hand and fed the bird. While it ate, she slid her finger into the plumage on its back to expose the USB port. After she connected it to her terminal, she ran the diagnostic.

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“We’re set!” Dideolu shouted from the comms station. “Get ready, everybody.”

Kehinde put away the satchel and stroked the crow’s head.

“Taiwo. GO!” she commanded. The crow flew up, and then soared in a wide arc above them. Seconds later, it disappeared inland, perpendicular to the road they had just driven down. Kehinde sat in the sand, tablet in hand, and watched the crow’s live feed. She hissed.

“Uncle G!”

Dideolu rushed over. Kehinde held up the tablet and pointed.

“Looks like fishermen sorting their morning’s catch,” Dideolu murmured. Kehinde nodded. The indicator showed the group to be about a hundred metres inland from where they were parked.

“So, do we—”

“NO!” Dideolu cut her off, “We continue as planned!” He wiped more sweat from his brow. He took off his lab coat and tossed it back into the truck.

“The launch of Nigeria’s first man into orbit will not be stopped by fishermen,” he nodded to himself, and his jaw tightened.

“Okay, then.” Kehinde said. She swiped her tablet, and typed commands to the crow.

• • • •

All four of the team members stood near the water, close enough for the waves to lap at their boots. The lab assistant was taking Abiona’s temperature. He flashed a light in his eyes and checked his vitals. There was a caw up above. Kehinde’s tablet beeped and vibrated. She looked up anxiously.

“Uncle, look!” she was gesticulating at the Atlantic. Three motorboats were approaching. Her tablet showed the boats were filled with roughly twenty people each.

“There’s nothing we can do about that, Kehinde,” Dideolu grimaced, turning away from the ocean and hurrying back to the launch preparations.

The boats landed on the shore. Kehinde saw men, women, and children lugging empty baskets out of the boat. A fish market. This was not good. Kehinde ran back to the truck, and tried to find something with which to set up a cordon or some kind of barrier between the launch site and the arriving fish traders.

• • • •

Dideolu and his assistant lowered another road case down into the sand.

“Check the signal,” Dideolu instructed his assistant, and opened the case. With his fingertips the professor slowly traced the intricate carvings on the double-headed axe. Kehinde jumped back out of the truck.

“What in God’s name is that?” Dideolu gasped at the cannon she was holding.

“It’s our Plan Z, Uncle,” Kehinde said, “In case all else fails and we have to make a rapid exit,” she stroked the top of the cannon, nodding at Dideolu.

“. . . I don’t have time for this,” Dideolu whispered and carefully lifted the axe out of the case.

The passengers had disembarked from the boat and were crowding around the team. Kehinde dropped the cannon into an empty road case, and surveyed the crowd. Most of their attention was directed at Abiona, who stood closest to the water. His wings were folded into two towers, shimmering in the morning sun.

“The signal is peaking, Prof!” called out the assistant.

Abiona flexed his arms, rose up to the balls of his feet, and rocked back and forth a bit. He started stretching and warming up, kicking up sand as he ran on the spot. Prof. Dideolu gripped the axe and strode over to the terminal his assistant had set up. He stood there, then looked to Kehinde. She glanced down at her tablet, then gave the thumbs up.

“The airspace is clear. The micro sees nothing below 40,000 feet in this sector.” Kehinde reported.

• • • •

“Abi na film?”

“Maybe na film dem dey do.”

One of the onlookers chuckled, shaking her head.

“ACTION!” yelled out a young boy, and the crowd erupted in laughter.

“Where the camera?” somebody asked.

“Na the camera be dat,” the guy next to him replied, pointing at the tablet in Kehinde’s hands.

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Dideolu inserted the double-headed axe into the slot; then, with both hands, he turned it counter-clockwise, from twelve, to six, to four.

• • • •

“Which movie be this?” A short woman had walked up behind Kehinde, startling her.

“Madam, please go back,” Kehinde said. “Go and stand there, please.” she ushered the inquiring woman back to the edge of the crowd. Kehinde checked her tablet again, and saw the fishermen. They had probably been wondering where their customers were, and had started moving out towards the shore. Kehinde wished she had brought her dog Zuki along.

Dideolu’s sonorous voice rang out as he recited Shango’s prayer. His assistant was checking data on the screen and typing away at his keyboard. Abiona stood between the two, eyes closed, arms slack at his sides.

“It has begun, Prof!” the assistant waved at the graphs and numbers scrolling down his monitor. The audio visualization bars in the side-widget on the screen rose as Dideolu’s voice grew louder.

“A little more bass on the vowels, Prof. Just a bit more,” the assistant said, and turned the equalizer knobs.

The fishermen had joined the crowd. Kehinde spotted a policeman. She looked down at the cannon inside the road case next to her. Her crow was circling above in a holding pattern.

The wind intensified with the rising of Dideolu’s voice.

“Ah ah!” a fisherman exclaimed, pointing up at the sky. A disc of rain clouds had formed. Lightning bolts struck the surface of the ocean. It was a bright sunny morning, but high above them a small patch of the sky had formed a rainless thunderstorm. Kehinde shifted closer to her team, pulling her road case with her, never taking her eyes off the

crowd, which had gone quiet. Some were staring up into the sky, some at Kehinde. But most of the crowd's attention was now directed at Dideolu, his assistant, and the strange man dressed only in a pair of khaki trousers and wearing some kind of wings.

"Which kind film be this o?" someone asked again, the cracking in his voice tensing up the crowd.

The ground beneath their feet shook when six lightning bolts pounded into the Atlantic. A woman gripped her basket tighter and her child clung to her wrapper. A humming sound rose from the terminal. The lab assistant gave the thumbs up. Abiona's 8.73-metre wings snapped to their full width. He leapt up and within seconds was a speck in the sky, on a straight line to the rain cloud formation. The clouds collapsed into the disc's centre and vanished. The underpressure knocked some people off their feet. Pandemonium broke out among the crowd. People were trampling each other. Cries of pain. The policeman's AK had gone off. Some people ran back up the beach. Some ran towards the ocean. A screaming cluster was running towards the truck. Kehinde reached into her case and pulled out the cannon.

"UNCLE!" she cried out. To her relief, she saw Dideolu and his assistant hurriedly stowing all the equipment back into the cases. Kehinde spun back to the people running towards her and shot. Screams followed. The canister landed in the midst of the group. A blue gas hissed and enveloped the crowd. The people stopped screaming, fell to the ground, and started convulsing. Electric arcs quivered between their bodies. It worked! Kehinde made a mental note of the dispersal rate of the gas, and then raced back to the truck. The driver stomped the gas.

• • • •

"Aremu, this is Ile-Ife. Come in, Aremu." The assistant started tweaking the frequency on the satellite transceiver.

"Try again, try again." Dideolu urged, sweating. His hands were gripping the edge of the workstation.

"Aremu, Aremu. This is Ile-Ife. Do you read me?" The same static came from the speakers.

"Aremu. This is Ile-Ife. Come in, Aremu."

"Let me see the video again." Dideolu asked, letting go of the table, flexing his fingers and then pressing them against his sweaty temples. Kehinde replayed the footage in slow motion.

"There. See, Uncle G? The micro drone clearly shows him passing through the door," she said, replaying the clip again. And again. And again.

"Okay, okay. Is okay." Dideolu waved her off. He leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling.

"If he made it through the door safely, then he should have made orbit. Provided the calculations are right," the assistant noted.

“They are correct,” Kehinde shot back. “Nothing wrong with the numbers. Havoc’s algorithms are fine.”

The assistant shrugged and didn’t say anything else.

“Havoc! Run full system diagnostics. Subsequent on success: Run full mission analysis of mission Aremu-Delta-64.12. Report.” Kehinde growled the commands. The lab AI gave the two affirming beeps. Behind her on the fifty-inch screen mounted above her workstation, the data from Havoc’s diagnostics began scrolling down the screen.

“This is Ile-Ife calling Aremu. Do you copy?” the assistant tried again.

Dideolu stood and picked up his mug. He gazed at his cold coffee.

“Ile-Ife calling Aremu. Come in, Aremu. Do you read?”

He put down the mug, went into his office, and pulled open a desk drawer.

“What? I thought you quit, Uncle G,” Kehinde gasped. Dideolu finished packing the pipe and shook a box of matches he plucked out of the drawer.

“I’m going up on the roof. Call me if anything changes,” he said.

{{ Full system diagnostics completed. Success. Errors: 0. Full mission analysis, Aremu-Delta-64.12 completed. Success. Errors: 0. Standing by. }}

“Thank you, Havoc. No further instructions,” Kehinde replied, then raised a brow at the lab assistant.

He nodded in resignation, “Aremu, Aremu. Come in for Ile-Ife. Aremu, Aremu.” Static. Dideolu opened the door to the stairwell.

“Aremu, do you copy? Arem—”

The speakers crackled.

“—and clear.”

Everybody froze. Dideolu and Kehinde rushed to the comms workstation.

“Aremu! Come in, Aremu!” the lab assistant cried. Dideolu shoved him aside and sat down at the terminal.

“Aremu! This is Ile-Ife. Do you copy?” Dideolu yelled into the mic.

“Ile-Ife, this is Aremu. I read you loud and clear.” Abiona’s voice echoed slightly as it came from the speakers. The group hug and jubilation almost had them all toppling over.

“It’s so GREAT to hear your voice, Abiona! How are you doing?” Dideolu continued. They were laughing and slapping each other on their backs.

“Ile-Ife, I am doing fine. Mission proceeding within parameters,” Abiona’s response came.

“What happened to your comm? Are you having technical difficulties?” Dideolu asked, “We have been trying to reach you for the past . . . ,” Dideolu looked up at the wall clock, “the past forty-five minutes.”

“I know, Ile-Ife. I know. I have been hearing your calls,” Abiona sounded agitated.

“But . . . I don’t understand. W . . . why didn’t you respond, then?” Prof asked. The ground team looked at each other in confusion.

“Because you didn’t start with the code string, Ile-Ife. And now you’re even using

my real name. What happened to operational discipline, Profess— . . . oh, dammit! Now I'm doing it, too."

• • • •

Kehinde opened the window, and the second micro drone, a crow identical to the Taiwo micro, came flying in from the night. The Kehinde crow perched next to the first bird.

"Aremu, please stand by for new coordinates," Dideolu instructed and muted the mic.

"Roger, Ile-Ife. Standing by," came Abiona's reply.

"How many were those? Four orbits?" Dideolu asked his assistant.

"Yes, Prof. Four around the Earth. We were about to commence the lunar orbits."

Dideolu waved him off, "Forget those. We need to get him down here fast." He paced up and down, chewing on his unlit pipe.

• • • •

{{ —and as we switch now to our correspondent Brad Lemon, who is live in Paris, we'd like to warn our viewers that some of the images you are about to see might not be suitable for children. Brad? First of all, Happy Halloween, Brad. Tell us, Brad, is this a Halloween prank gone too far? }}

{{ Hi, Jenny. Yes, Happy Halloween from Paris, and no, this is not a Halloween prank. As you can see from this footage taken this morning at the Badagry Beach in Lagos, Nigeria, as we slow down the video, you can clearly see a man in mid air, a black . . . aah a male black, that is an African, with WINGS, Jenny. CIA analysts have in fact confirmed this footage is authentic. There are rumours in Nigeria of a space program, of this being part of a national space program, although the government of Nigeria, and indeed the President of Nigeria, have come out and categorically denied the existence of any such program. However, given these disturbing images and the nationwide panic they are causing, the Nigerian government has declared a state of national emergency. A dusk-to-dawn curfew is in effect. }}

{{ Very disturbing indeed, Brad. And tell us, it is being reported the French government has declared a No-Fly Zone over Nigerian airspace, grounding all flights? }}

{{ That is correct. If you look behind me here, you can see the French Minister of Defense and the French President on their way to a cabinet meeting. France, of course, has extensive political and economic interests in Africa, especially in its former colonies. Though not a former French colony, France has stated for reasons of "national and global security and stability, a No-Fly Zone covering the entire Nigerian airspace is to go into effect immediately." France and the US are also in an emergency UN Security Council meeting. Sources inside the UN have stated a resolution has been

tabled to temporarily suspend Nigeria from the UN, as well as the suspension of recognition of the sovereignty of Nigeria as a national entity. It is expected this resolution will be passed, although China and Russia are said to be calling for more talks with the Nigerian government. Back to you, Jenny. }}

{{ Thank you, Brad. We turn now to— }}

"If the country is under a French No-Fly Zone, or about to be," Kehinde said, "Then we cannot risk landing Abiona here on the roof, or anywhere else in this country."

The room was silent.

"And we should think about moving the other astronauts," she continued, "Maybe even the children, too."

"What about Havana?" Dideolu asked.

"The Cuban facility is not yet fully operational," the assistant replied. "They currently have no capacity to manage a re-entry, let alone an emergency clandestine one."

"Salvador?" Dideolu continued.

"Yes, Brazil, at this point, is the only viable option," the assistant said. "The program in Salvador is mature."

Dideolu agreed, pacing slowly, "Yes, yes. They are just two weeks away from their own test launch. Kehinde, send word to Brazil. Quickly."

• • • •

The sun was starting to rise. The two crow drones were asleep. Kehinde closed the chat with Gorimapa and rubbed her eyes. It was getting light outside. Dideolu and his assistant were seated at the telecoms workstation, and monitored Abiona's landing in Brazil.

"Did he make it?" Kehinde asked, stretching and yawning loudly. She heaved herself up from her workstation and trudged to Dideolu.

"They've got him. Everything went well." Dideolu clapped his hands together.

"What time is it there?" Kehinde asked, scratching her tummy.

"2:04 a.m.," replied the assistant. Kehinde's gaze drifted to the window. You couldn't hear anything this far out, but there were riots across the city, according to the news. And Gorimapa had confirmed it.

"I have to get back to my place to pick up Zuki," she said, and turned to grab her backpack.

"What?" Dideolu stood so suddenly he knocked over his chair. "I thought you said they are rioting? And that the Army is shooting people!"

"That's why I'm taking this with me," Kehinde held up her gas cannon before stuffing it in her backpack, "I am not leaving my dog out there, Uncle G, you know how—"

"Kehinde, listen," he interjected, "You cannot risk your life for an animal."

"UNCLE GBENGA!" Her fists trembled by her sides.

"You are too important to the program, Kehinde, please be reasonable. This is bigger

than us," Dideolu continued, "Surely, you must realize that. You are risking the future of the entire black race."

"Zuki may be just an animal to you, Uncle G. But she is family," Kehinde's voice was calm, "I know you can't understand, and I don't expect you to." She turned away, "Havoc! Disengage front door security and unlock. Subsequent: On my exit. Auto-lock and engage security."

• • • •

The cannon lay on the passenger seat next to her, and Kehinde had an axe under her driver's seat. The old Nissan Pathfinder raced back towards the city. She had her tablet docked and slipped in her earpiece. Taiwo flew overhead, streaming a high definition video feed of the road in front, as well as the road behind her. It was 5:30 a.m.

• • • •

There was a column of smoke two blocks down the road. A group of youngsters had used burning car tires to set up a roadblock. The Army was moving towards Kehinde's neighbourhood, and she could already hear the shots. A gun battle erupted up the road she had just driven down. Kehinde tapped her tablet's screen, and the crow promptly circled over her house and her landlord's house. She studied the images carefully, then sucked in her breath and clenched her jaw. Kehinde turned off the engine and checked her cannon. Then she grabbed her backpack and got out of the SUV.

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She could already hear Zuki barking. The voices in her landlord's house rang through their broken window. Her landlord's front door had been kicked in. There was a shriek, and the sound of breaking glass. Then their house went quiet. Kehinde reached her own fence and squatted by the gate. She peered through the gap. Three men were trying to force her door. Zuki was going nuts inside the house. Kehinde raised the cannon and shot. The canister soared high above her, over the wall, and hit the guy standing on the left in the back of his head.

• • • •

Kehinde put Zuki on a leash and led her out the door, past the unconscious looters. Smoke was already billowing from her one-bedroom when Kehinde dropped the empty petrol jerry can on the grass. She dragged a gym bag behind them as she and Zuki made their way back to the SUV.

• • • •

"She made it." The lab assistant raised his eyebrows. Dideolu ignored the dog running up to him, barking happily and wagging its tail.

"You should bring your crows in. The French No-Fly Zone is in effect," Dideolu said, dropping himself onto the couch by his office door. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Zuki jumped up on the couch and put her head in his lap.

"The US Navy has deployed the Sixth Fleet, man. They are going to blockade Nigeria!" the lab assistant exclaimed.

"How much food do we have here?" Kehinde asked. Dideolu's and his assistant's heads snapped towards her.

"I burnt down my place. Yours, too, on my way back, Uncle G," she said, "We need to find our way out of the country. NATO is deploying troops."

"They're sending NATO troops to Lagos?" the assistant cried, standing up.

"Not just Lagos. NATO is deploying across Nigeria." Kehinde said.

• • • •

Porto-Novo, Republic of Benin, three months later

Dideolu looked up as Kehinde and his assistant came through the door, hauling bags of groceries.

"They found the Brazilians," Dideolu gestured at the TV screen, tears streaming down his face. "Abiona is dead."

His assistant dropped the grocery bags with a crash. Kehinde stood silently. Zuki sniffed the groceries strewn on the floor.

"Nobody in Brazil knows where we are," Kehinde reassured, and set down her bags.

{{ *—by multiple IED attacks across Nigeria. This figure marks the highest number of NATO casualties since the intervention began. The Greek government has stated it is considering a withdrawal of its troo—* }}

Kehinde switched off the TV.

"Uncle G. You need to stop watching this shit. It's not helping."

• • • •

The raid on their Brazil operation had proven catastrophic. The mission was more or less public knowledge, now. Everybody thought they were sending the omoshango to the Moon. At least information on the true destination of the mission seemed to still be inaccurate. Don't call them astronauts, Dideolu had snarled at her a week ago. They are not oyinbo, he whined. He didn't like afronauts, either. Too American, he said. She had jokingly suggested omo Shango, the children of Shango. It was the first time in weeks that his eyes lit up.

{{ *—tional Guard and the US Marine Corps deployed along the US Atlantic Coast. The President and Commander-in-Chief has given a shoot to kill order against any*

African-Americans who try to "desert the United States." Under the War Homeland and Treason Powers Act, the President has declared all African and Afro-Latin American immigrants to be enemy combatants. A forty-eight-hour deadline for these immigrants to report to DHS holding centers expired at midnight. The White House denied all allegations that these detention centres were in fact death camps. }}

Kehinde punched the Off button on the remote, and put a blanket on Dideolu. His snoring was not as loud as usual, tonight.

• • • •

"And he said this to you when?" Kehinde asked.

"In my dream, last night," Dideolu replied, "Like I said, we need to get a team up there as soon as possible." Dideolu scribbled on a pad excitedly. He had not yet brushed his teeth.

"When is the window?" his assistant inquired.

"End of this week." Dideolu responded.

"This week? How do we get—" Kehinde asked, then Dideolu handed her a new list of names. She studied it, and then just gawked at him.

"Get to Osun State, ASAP, Kenny. These are the people you need to extract," Dideolu instructed.

The assistant spat out his tea, "Nigeria? The Nigeria that's under NATO occupation?" he asked, laughing incredulously. Dideolu nodded, wiping the tea drops from his face. He wasn't as glum as he had been since they escaped to Porto-Novo, Kehinde thought.

• • • •

"You trained for this. This mission is now in your hands. It sinks or soars with your wings," Dideolu declared to the team of omoshango Kehinde had managed to exfiltrate from Nigeria two days ago.

"We will be in constant contact. We are in this together," Dideolu continued. The lab assistant moved around between the omoshango, checking their vitals.

"The hope of our entire race depends on your success on this day, people," Dideolu said, standing back and looking the three omoshango over.

• • • •

The Foton truck pulled over and Kehinde deployed her crows. Then she rolled a dolly full of road cases over to a news crew, who were preparing hot air balloons. The three omoshango disembarked from the truck, Kalashnikovs strapped to their chest harnesses. Dideolu and his assistant quickly set up the launch terminal. Kehinde's crows sailed up into the misty dawn. The news crew was almost done firing up the three hot air balloons. Kehinde crouched down next to Zuki and stroked her back.

“Stay close today, Zook. No nonsense, okay, baby?” Zuki barked in protest, but laid down in the grass.

The omoshango all ran another weapons check. The lab assistant analysed the readings, then gave a thumbs up. Dideolu turned the axe and started the prayer. High above them, the sky started twisting into a disc of flickering rain clouds. Shango’s portal was far bigger this time. Even though the French No-Fly Zone did not include Benin, two fighter jets from the US Navy carrier, which was deployed in the Gulf of Guinea, reached the cloud formation in minutes. When the F/A-18 jets dove to perform a reconnaissance fly-by over their position, their engine roar shook the ground. Kehinde clenched her teeth and Zuki barked hysterically.

The crows floated alongside the news crew in their hot air balloons. The word PRESS, in white stencils, covered half of each balloon’s rosy nylon. Cameras and directional microphones hung from the sides of the gondolas. The three omoshango raced up into the sky. The two F/A-18s pulled up in pursuit.

• • • •

{{ *Watchtower, Watchtower. This is Bandit. We have three hostiles BRA 183 for two 2000 ft FAST. Civilian news aircraft loitering on site. Permission to engage.* }}

{{ *Bandit. Watchtower. Copy that. Standby for satellite confirmation.* }}

{{ *Bandit, what do you think? They’ll let us pop those press balloons?* }} Jester came in over the radio.

{{ *Shut up, Jester. Keep your eyes on that cloud formation.* }}

{{ *Roger that, Bandit.* }}

The fighters were still in pursuit of the omoshango, who were looping higher.

{{ *I mean, how crazy is this, Bandit? We’re chasing flying hajjis.* }}

{{ *Dumbass. They’re niggers, not hajjis.* }}

{{ *Whatever, Bandit. I’m taking a picture.* }}

{{ *If you can get close enough, that is.* }}

{{ *Agile motherfuckers, ain’t they?* }}

The radio buzzed.

{{ *Bandit. Watchtower. Do not engage civilian news aircraft. You are cleared to engage hostiles only. Repeat. Engage hostiles only.* }}

{{ *Copy that, Watchtower. Bandit out. Let’s tag ’em, Jester.* }}

• • • •

On the ground, Kehinde watched as tracers from the jets spat across the sky. The omoshango trio broke off in different directions, easily dodging the fire from the F/A-18 fighters. The news balloons gained altitude to get a better view.

• • • •

{{ *You gotta be kidding me,* }} Jester called over the comms. {{ *I got one on my six. I can't shake him loose.* }} There was a muzzle flash from the omoshango's AK, and three rounds slammed into Jester's fuselage.

{{ *FUCK! I'm hit. I'm hit!* }} Jester yelled out.

{{ *Calm down, Jester. I got you,* }} cried Bandit, banking his fighter hard towards Jester's position.

• • • •

The omoshango continued their elegant loops. They doubled back, stylishly evaded the jet fighters, and opened fire at them in bursts.

"The door is opening, we're running out of time, Prof!" shouted the assistant. A massive crowd had formed on the ground near the team, watching the spectacle in the Benin sky. The people kept their distance at the sight of Kehinde brandishing her cannon. Zuki strained against her leash and barked furiously. Kehinde's earpiece buzzed.

"The police is on their way, Uncle G! Five minutes out!" Kehinde yelled.

An explosion ripped across the sky and a collective gasp came from the crowd.

• • • •

{{ *JESTER!!! FUCK!! WATCHTOWER! WATCHTOWER! JESTER IS DOWN! REPEAT JESTER IS DOWN. ONE HOSTILE DOWN. I HAVE TWO MORE ON MY TAIL . . . FUCK! . . .* }} Bandit flew an evasive manoeuvre, trying to break free from the remaining two omoshango who had managed to attach themselves to his wings.

"Mother of God . . ." Bandit whispered as the omoshango crawled towards his cockpit.

{{ *Bandit, Bandit. This is Wildcat on approach. ETA 2 minutes. Standby,* }} radioed the next two inbound F/A-18 fighter jets.

• • • •

A storm wind bent the trees around them. Dideolu's papers fluttered away in the wind, caught in the vortex spanning from the ground to the cloud formation. Another boom and a fireball of debris from the obliterated fighter jet rained down over the Atlantic.

"Uncle G!" Kehinde shouted over the raucous wind, and the commotion from the crowd. The police were forcing their way through the spectators. Shots were being fired into the air. The smell of tear gas started spreading.

"IT'S OPEN! IT'S OPEN!!" yelled the assistant, and Dideolu fell to his knees exhausted. He felt dizzy and dug his fingers into the grass.

"Look, Prof. Look!" the assistant shouted.

The three news balloons got caught by the vortex and disintegrated. The crowd screamed in dismay. Nine omoshango soared through the remains of the balloons they had been riding, disguised as journalists. The omoshango sailed around the centre of the rotating clouds, their road cases suspended in the vortex.

"They're clear! They're clear!!" the lab assistant jumped up and down as the nine omoshango, along with the road cases, flew into the vortex. The cloud collapse wreaked havoc on the ground.

• • • •

Kehinde's phone and tablet batteries were critical, her spares were empty, and there was no power in the abandoned building. She peered through the second floor window. The sun was setting, and curfew was in effect. The streets of Porto-Novo were now being patrolled by French military. The occupation had spilled over from Nigeria into Benin. Kehinde was waiting for nightfall, then she would try to get outside and find some place to charge up her devices. She had neither heard from Uncle Gbenga nor from his assistant after they split up during the escape. Her phone vibrated. It was an SMS from Gorimapa:

The Americans caught the Professor! Check TV! Get online now!

• • • •

Kehinde held Zuki's muzzle shut as they hid in the darkness behind the Solar Kiosk, where she was charging her devices. The headlights from the French convoy swept over the building behind them. She had found a tattered blanket, and when the convoy was gone she pulled the blanket over her head and her laptop. She opened her laptop again to the ongoing chat. Hopefully Gorimapa had responded.

KETU: I should have stayed with him.

GORIMAPA: At least him assistant escape with the axe.

KETU: Do you know where the Americans took Prof?

Gorimapa had not replied yet. She should have stayed with Uncle G. She should have kept the drones on him. They should have all stayed together. Zuki whimpered, and she squeezed her muzzle.

"Sshh, Zuki. Please."

GORIMAPA: The helicopter fly go the carrier. Nuttin wey you fit do, K. Forget. You no be Rambo.

KETU: Don't worry about me, Gorimapa. I'm going to go get my uncle back. Thanks for moving the rest of the omoshango.

GORIMAPA: No wahala. Just make sure you leave Benin safe o. You owe me big money. No come just die o. :P

{{ —to remind our viewers these images are ten minutes old, due to the time it takes the signal from the Rover to reach Earth. Earlier today in Porto-Novo, Benin, at about

7:30 a.m. local, this . . . event, uh, phenomenon which NASA scientists are referring to as a wormhole, opened up in Mars orbit, and these members of what we now know to be the Ile-Shango extremist group, popularly known as the Exodus Movement, travelled through this wormhole, and have in fact landed on the Mars surface. US forces, in collaboration with our NATO allies, have captured the leader of the Exodus Movement, one Adegbenga Dideolu. Interrogation has so far revealed the movement's plan is to "liberate the black race and all people of colour from oppression on Earth, and to organize an exodus of all people of colour to the Home of Shango, where they can live free from oppression, persecution and exploitation." As you can see now from this video being streamed to us from NASA, the extremists began excavation work sometime yesterday, around what is called the "Face on Mars." NASA has no information at this point on the technology being used by the Exodus Movement, but a NASA spokesperson said an "unfathomable amount of excavation work has been done, in an impossibly short time." And if you look at these images, what has now become visible are the neck, shoulder, arm, and raised fist of the "Face on Mars," wielding what appears to be a double-headed axe. }}

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dayo Ntwari, a Rwandan Nigerian writer, has been a fan of science fiction and fantasy since childhood. He enjoys writing stories inspired by African legends and myths. He believes Africa's diverse histories, religions, spirituality and mythologies can serve as a never-ending treasure trove of inspiration for African science fiction and fantasy. His short stories include "Devil's Village" (shortlisted for the Writivism 2015 Short Story Prize), "Nomansland" (shortlisted for the 2015 Huza Press Award), and "Mother's Love" (longlisted for the 2015 Short Story Day Africa Prize). Dayo lives in Rwanda, where he is currently working on his first novel. He also hopes to publish a collection of his short stories. You can find him online at dayontwari.com and on Twitter @dayontwari.

Firebird

Isha Karki | 9,000 words

You may come into contact with a live subject.

Her body slides into a tube. When the whirring stops, the sloping metal is inches from her face. Percy thinks of Anarkali, buried alive, and clenches the buzzer in her sweaty palm. She will not press it, even if these walls threaten to crush her lungs.

They are testing her. She needs this.

No one in the forty-fifth cohort has ever been on a mission—not even the Slummies. Before they are assigned any, the trainees have to undergo Testing, designed to weed out the strong from the weak. They've all heard rumours from the seniors, the sleepless nights, the impossible tasks, but Testing isn't set to happen till the end of the year; there are months left. No one was expecting a new scheme: Trial missions before Testing. Random selection. Be prepared.

She remembers the sneers on her classmates' faces as she was collected, the whispers —*brownies always get preference; bet she'll have it easy.* She'd steeled her shoulders, kept her head steady, not let her step falter one bit.

She has been chosen first, she doesn't know why, she doesn't know what exactly for, but she can't mess it up. Percy is going to do exactly as they say, and do it so well they'll have to acknowledge it. Obedience Above All. The coveted OAA is awarded every term, and though there are only a few girls scattered in the academy, none have won in years. Percy is determined this time it will be hers: scholarship girl transformed to a trailblazing Kali, feet on Shiva's chest.

Her shoulder blades jut against the metal bed. Percy hates it, this flat-on-your-back feeling. The worn scrubs, the needles, her nakedness. She wasn't allowed any POMs, to keep her bloodstream free of caffeine and power aides, and now her head throbs. A strobe light runs the length of her body. She should have VM-ed her mother. Percy imagines her, kneeling in front of a flickering candle, the comforting weight of a brass ghanti in hand, murmuring the Durga mantra in her name.

Roaring vibrations run through the scanner. Her body shakes.

Dr. Grey's words float into her mind: *Simple procedures to test the acquisition capacity of your language centres. You'll be pleased to know this is the inaugural transfer—if successful, your participation will make real headway in our current research.*

Scan, surgery, transfer, Percy repeats in her head, trying to calm the rapid hoof beat in her chest.

A fraction of a second before she drifts into darkness—*click*—the sound of someone screaming, then—

• • • •

That night, in her new Isolation Pod, with its stiff sheets and stark white walls, Percy dreams of the ocean.

Sun-warmed water laps her body: For miles, all she sees is green-blue-glitter, all she hears is the screech of gulls, the rush of waves. The water soothes the sting of blisters and the rope-torn skin on her palms.

She takes a deep breath, shoots down. Her stomach feels taut, her limbs longer, her skin darker. The sand is a strange, dusty red. She can hold her breath for impossibly long, a sapling Varuna of the seas, so she stills, watches red and yellow-flecked fish slice the water. They're fast; she tried to follow them once but her lungs had burned. Now, with a few moments left, she lets the silence womb her. This—the sharpness of salt and rust, the weightless bob of her body—this is peace.

Percy's never been to the ocean; she doesn't know how to swim. Yet, that first night of unsettling sleep, she craves it as if she were born with fins.

• • • •

"Okay, you can relax now."

The aircraft stills, engines off, wheels secure. Hands shaking, Percy unclips herself from the seat, scan-prints out. The whoosh of air, though stale inside the aircraft hangar, is still welcome and she breathes it in gulps.

She remembers the thrill in her stomach when Dr. Grey told her she was to have brief flight training for her mission. Only fourth-year seniors are trusted with that luxury; for trainees, it's simulation after simulation. It's the first bit of Physical she's doing after days of being cooped up, wires attached to her temples, plugged to machines and Dr. Grey hovering, taking endless notes about how she was *feeling*. Flight training had seemed a godsend—but after that thunderous touchdown, Percy feels far less thrilled, her feet glad to be on level ground.

"Good luck." Hyena, the First Officer overseeing her training, holds out his hand, an odd expression on his face. Though he has spoken to her only of coordinates, air pressure and safety plans, Percy doesn't feel at ease with him. There is something about the curl of his mouth, the flick of his gaze, that makes her wary.

"Thank you, Officer." She grips his hand for a second.

"You'll need it, considering who they've assigned to fly this baby." He pats the Fury.

She frowns, unsure of his meaning, unsure of this sudden offering of information.

"They got the best machine all right, but the Captain's a mess. Hasn't flown since his last mission; crashed his plane, one of those shit Icarus models, so not surprising really, and his co-pilot was a casualty. Tragic, right?"

"God," she breathes out. Her legs are still wobbly after Hyena's plunge landing. She wishes she had her POMs with her; she could do with an energy boost.

"Yeah, but the best bit, they say the two were, you know," he waggles his eyebrows, "butt-lovers. He hasn't been allowed into the cockpit since, no one knows if he can fly

anymore." He pauses, leans in so close she can smell his sour breath, "PTSD."

His smirk twists his face. She steps back, not letting her expression waver.

"But you should be okay, like I showed you, all these aircrafts have autopilot mode. I'd say switch it on even when he's flying."

Hyena is vile, but he is her senior, and the academy's codes of respect stop her from saying anything. They wouldn't let a sub-par pilot on her mission. He's just trying to scare her, the green first-year trainee, a girl on top of that. She doesn't let her gaze drop; she's not going to be cowed by his talk.

A line of Slummies file in past her. She catches the shift in Hyena's smile. He salutes her, idles towards them, calls out. The Slummies bristle. She sees the way their bodies tense at his approach.

Is it always like this—for them? Despite being at the academy for months, Percy has no idea what the Slummies do, where they eat, where they sleep. They're on a segregated program stream—even though they have more in common with her than anyone else here, their uniforms threadbare, their array of dark skins melding with shadows into one big mass. She is just a few steps away from blending in.

It was one of the reasons she was drawn to the academy: Their commitment to "social mobility," as they'd said in the recruitment reels she spent days re-watching before applying. It all sounded so grand. In practice, there is an obvious *difference*.

A snaking voice whispers: *And why is it they have chosen you?*

When they plucked her from class, the cramped room they'd been shifted to after the south wing fire, and initiated Isolation, she was sure they'd made a mistake. Only soldiers on missions were kept in Isolation, not first-year trainees. Any second they would push her back out, her feet dragging on the marble floor. Dr. Grey had appeared reminding her about the new scheme they were trialling.

Despite what they'd said—random selection—Dr. Grey told her she'd been scouted specifically. They'd seen her potential; she'd be perfect for this mission.

But what did Percy have to offer?

There are cleverer students, those that excel in Physical, those that come from expensive private institutes—those that *fit*.

The only thing that sets her apart is the colour of her skin; the momo she grew up eating; her mother's attachment to old gods from faraway lands. She has tried, so hard, to strip it out of her voice, but there is still something of her mother's lilt clinging on. It sounds like the sizzle of onions and the ringing of brass bells in the wind: a pungent childhood and the ghost of ransacked temples, lingering on.

The facts settle heavily in her stomach. She shrouds herself in the safety of her unremarkable name but she can't hide from the thought itself: Maybe her difference *is* the reason they have chosen her.

She touches her shorn hair, forces her shaking hands to still. Whatever thoughts curdle in her mind, she can't let them see any weakness.

She looks up and catches one of the Slummies staring at her. She expects him to leer,

but his gaze is hard. She turns and walks away, face red, heart skittering. She hates to admit it, even to herself, but she's so very grateful: At least she's not one of them.

• • • •

That night, she dreams of a row of Slummies stretched out before her, a hand span between each body.

Their skin, a rainbow of browns, looks stark against the white sheet drawn up to their necks. She can't tell if they are breathing. She thinks she sees someone she knows: the curve of a cheekbone, frizzing hair, dimples. She leans forward, her own body lankier—

"Fresh meat!"

She whips around to see a man approaching her. He is rotund, whiskers everywhere. She imagines boar tusks protruding from his lips. He raises his arms, "Welcome."

He walks towards her, jowls shaking, wiping his glasses on his lab coat. For a second, she wants to bolt, rush back out into the starry night, run to the sea.

The man calls over his shoulder, "Harvest them."

Before he reaches her, in fractions of seconds, the stretchers start moving, pulled mechanically into holes in the wall, metal teeth gaping. As she watches, as the man comes to stand by her with a soft "ah," all of the Slummies—even the one with the frizzing hair and dimples—are swallowed by the wall.

• • • •

"Your mission is to cargo a live subject to a secure location. You're the handler. I'm taking you to see the subject now, I hope I don't need to press upon you the need for complete discretion."

Percy feels a twinge of disappointment. Her first ever mission, the one that'll prove her worth, that will vault her to the stars, and it's only to be a handler, a babysitter. Her troubled sleep is making her tetchy. She is dehydrated after her final transfer, and though they'd shot her up with strong painkillers, her head pounds.

Dr. Grey frowns at her uncharacteristic silence, blonde eyebrows bulging, "This is a highly sensitive mission. Handling of the subject has been limited to only myself and a few researchers. If you feel that the task is beneath your expectations, then by all means, don't exert yourself."

"No—I'm sorry, of course not, I'm honoured to be chosen for this mission, truly."

Dr. Grey nods at her and doesn't say anything more.

Get a grip, Perce, you need this.

No POMs today either; her body feels like it will crumple any second. The lack of daily Combat lessons is making her weak. Though she's always kept herself apart from the other students, ever since Isolation, she finds herself missing the chatter that used to

fill their communal pods. The silence of her pod births disturbing dreams.

The glass chute drops at an uncomfortable pace; her fingertips grip the walls. Dr. Grey watches her closely—as she's been doing constantly this past week, ever since they verified that the transfers were successful. Her hand goes to the silicon patches on her neck. They're designed to monitor her absorption of the transfer. She should be excited but after days of scans and needles and probing evaluations, she's starting to feel like a lab rat.

"Are you in pain?" Dr. Grey has a Life in her hand, poised to take notes.

"No ma'am, nothing unmanageable." For a brief second, Percy considers telling the doctor about her dream—a line of Slummie bodies flash in front of her—but she hates the idea of admitting weakness. One of the first things they learn at the academy: Soldiers don't have nightmares.

The elevator pings. They have arrived, it seems, at the very depths of the academy; it is sleek and silent. She had no idea the structure went this deep. She pads behind Dr. Grey through a maze of retinal scans and vaulted doors, everything white marble and glass. The temperature gets cooler and cooler. What could it be, beyond all these barriers? What could they possibly be keeping?

The doctor stops abruptly. When she turns to Percy, she seems hesitant, worry lining her face. Percy has never seen her like this.

"Please—don't scream."

Percy is taken aback. She forces her face to remain stiff. Something swills in her stomach. She feels like she's back on the Fury as it plunges nose first to the ground. Wary, she enters a darkened room. Dr. Grey clicks her fingers, light floods in, and Percy catches a glimpse of the *live subject*.

There is a scream, bubbling in her throat, threatening to erupt, but she swallows hard. Her hand, unsteady, covers her mouth.

"What—what is he?"

Dr. Grey seems to choose her words with care: "A military research subject."

"Was he born like this?"

There have always been rumours of the military's secret experiments, but Percy's paid them no heed. After Project Oly, the government had brought in laws: Research must be declared after it passes a viable stage. That last project had been shut down—a disaster, missing researchers, a radiation dumping ground somewhere—and there has been nothing anywhere about *this*.

"Of course not. You're looking at something scientifically curated. We made this."

Made. Engineered. Cut up and sewn together.

A year ago, in her admissions interview, Percy had debated the necessity of genetic experimentation with an ethics professor, arguing for the scope of advancement that could be achieved. She was passionate, thumping her fists on the table, *people are afraid of the unknown, they give too much credence to the sanctity of the human form.* Percy has always been good with theory. They were impressed with her brazenness, her

commitment to crossing new frontiers.

But this . . . her mouth is dry, questions rushing through her head.

"Did he volunteer for—this?"

There is a pause. "He was compensated, of course. His family can live comfortably now."

"Is he a *Slummie?"*

"I'm afraid I'm not able to provide further information. Once a soldier volunteers for a mission of this nature, their previous identity ceases to exist."

Percy stares at the creature behind the screen. He is sitting, elbows on knees, head bowed, eyes closed. She can see the rise and fall of his chest. Under all that metal, there is a person like her—*more* like her than the doctor—his skin dusk against glinting metal.

An image interrupts her thoughts: *Her crouched in that corner, metal fused with bone, eyes slitted orange, head shaved, a large disc at the base of her skull. Trapped in a cage of black glass. Hungry. Alone. Furious.*

The pounding in her head gets louder and she clenches her eyes to make the image go away.

"Do those work? They're wings, aren't they?"

Inside, she is baulking—marvelling—at the thought of a human who can really fly. A modern day Garuda; a metal-plated pari.

"Correct, but they don't anymore." At Percy's stare, she adds, "We've edited the design so it's no longer possible."

"Edited? How?"

"Neurosurgery. In layman terms, we've made the subject unlearn. You create the right interference during memory allocation and you can reverse or block the process."

"But why?" Her words are loud. Her face feels hot. "Why make something and then destroy it? What is he designed *for?"*

"That's not your concern, *trainee,"* Dr. Grey stresses the last word, "There are security measures we have to follow; we can't divulge more than the necessary information."

She nods automatically. Obedience Above All. She breathes deep, though the thought is spinning in her mind: how easy it is to be swallowed by the academy, how easy it is to cease being *human.*

She wants, desperately, to know who he is. She can't explain this visceral reaction, but there's something within her that is irrevocably shaken. But what can she do? Months of drilling pull her back: A good soldier follows orders without question. She *needs* this.

Come on, Perce. Act like one of the other trainees would. Show her you can handle this.

"Those scans and transfers were for him?" Her voice doesn't waver.

The doctor nods, "We're trying to assess modes of communication between the subjects and ourselves. So far it seems they don't use speech."

"Even though he presumably spoke before?"

"It appears so. With language, it isn't so simple as making someone relearn. Do you feel any different now?" At the shake of her head, Dr. Grey continues, "Can you try to speak to the subject?"

"Can he hear through the glass?" At Dr. Grey's silence, she tries to keep the alarm out of her voice, "You want me to go inside?"

Her gut is twisting. Though a huge part of her is fascinated by this creature, she wishes and wishes she didn't have to face him. Her cowardice is ugly.

"It's perfectly safe. Once you're inside the room, there's a thinner glass partition that only we can operate. You can try speaking through that." Dr. Grey gestures to the door.

This is nothing, Percy tells herself. You'll have to do worse during Testing.

She walks through the open glass door, eyes down, one foot in front of the other, and stops at the partition. She can feel Dr. Grey following her in, observing. She taps her fingers lightly on the glass.

"Hello," she hesitates, "My name is Percy."

Not even a flicker. Another image flashes into her mind: *lightweight, flexi-metal feathers trailing the floor. Her face looks sunken; her body is bruised. She feels so tired. She knows there are eyes watching her and all she wants is to go to sleep.*

No—this is a subject, don't feel sorry for him. You don't know who he is. They could ask you to kill him in a heartbeat and you would have to be willing.

But before she can stop herself, before she can explain it to herself, the words tumble out of her mouth, "Would it be okay if I had a few moments alone with him?"

"You want me to leave?" There is a note of incredulity in Dr. Grey's voice.

Percy turns, mouth dry, pointing at the black globes on the wall. "You'll be watching, won't you? It might help."

The doctor is looking at her through narrowed eyes; her gaze flickers to the patches on Percy's skin, to the steel insert in her arm. Percy can see the cogs turn—*high-risk situation*—and turn—*this girl thinks she's more important than she is*—and turn again—*could this yield some results?*

"Well, I suppose it can't do any harm. If things look promising, we will open the partition."

Percy's eyes snap to hers. Be calm. Be strong. This will show them you're the right soldier for this. She nods, "Does he have a name?"

"He . . . No." The word is flat. The doctor's nostrils are flared, mouth pinched.

Obedience Above All.

But Percy finds that she needs something, anything, to normalise this situation, to calm the churn of her stomach.

"You must refer to him with some name?"

"Firebird—we use the codename Firebird."

• • • •

As soon as Dr. Grey turns away, his eyes snap open. Even from this distance, she can see his remarkable pupils, orange and black, like a tiger's.

Heart thumping, she raises her palms up in front of her: the universal sign of peace. *Please, let this work.*

She waits a beat, then whispers, "Is it okay if I come in for a while?"

A screeching sound makes her freeze. Glass is shaking all around them. It's like nothing she has heard: human and animal, nails on metal. Hairline cracks spider across the partition.

She is beginning to understand why they have clipped his wings. Even behind the glass, she can feel the heat radiating off him. There is something thrumming just beneath the surface of his skin.

They are afraid of him.

His ribs jut with every breath. Slowly, he rises. She hears the clink and scrape of metal.

Standing, he is magnificent—and appalling—and impossible.

She is clenching her fists so tight, biting her bottom lip so hard, her nails are bent, there is blood on her teeth. She focuses on the details to stop herself from bolting out the door. Half of his face is metal. If this were a LifeFlix, she would be able to pluck the mask away, and see the real person underneath. There are sections of metal plating his body. She can't see past his trousers, but she imagines it carries on down his leg. Is it a casing, tight around his skin, or has his flesh been stripped away and replaced completely? How do his inner functions work; is there real blood pumping in his veins?

He takes a step forward. With that shift, she sees his wings: long, blade-like feathers. There are faint lacerations all over his arms. What is he? This creature they have hidden away in the bowels of the academy.

"Who are you?" she breathes.

He comes towards her, an unspoken answer. He shouldn't be so quick, not with the burdens of his flesh, but almost at once, he is in front of her, his hot breath steaming the glass between them.

The partition glides open.

The stench of blood and sweat hits her. Her stomach churns, fear prickles her scalp. When he looks at her, does he see prey?

His face shifts. She sees the tightness of his jaw ease. A low growl reverberates from his throat, and she is surprised by how mild it is. Her stomach muscles relax. Despite her fear, she feels a pressing need to treat him as human, not a thing cut up with metal.

Slowly, she holds out her right hand. She looks down, prompting him to look at her hand. Seconds pass. Thump, thump, thump.

His eyes flick back up, uncertain. She sees him extending his arm towards her, and she is flooded with relief, she smiles—

Something jerks her back. The glass partition hurtles across. Dr. Grey is pulling her out of the room. She looks back in confusion. Firebird is still standing there, behind the

glass, arm half extended. She sees him glance down and as she follows his gaze, she finally sees his hands. Thin metal spikes erupt out of his palms, like hair out of pores.

They would have butchered her hand.

His head snaps up to look at her, something glimmering in his eyes. Just before she loses sight of him, she sees him pull his hands back, as if he is about to clap, and with one sudden movement—she cries out in pain.

• • • •

She can't sleep. Her empty POM bottle rolls to the floor of the Isolation Pod. Thoughts and images are careening inside her head.

What was Firebird? Why had no one heard of him? Surely whatever the academy is doing is sound? They are leaders in their field, funded by the government; Percy trusts them with her life.

She has to. When you pledge allegiance to the academy, obedience is ingrained in your every breath.

It must be only a matter of time before they announce it. But when Firebird is revealed to the public, what will happen—will they marvel or rage?

Her Life pings. *Sleep on time, chori.* The same message every day. How strange that her mother's life continues without change. She wants to VM her, confide everything in whispery sips, but she is bound by the rules, by her Imprint stamped on an agreement she didn't even read properly. Perhaps her mother would tell Percy to have faith in the gods. She thinks of them in all their many-armed, blue-skinned glory. Would Ganesha, resurrected with an elephant's head, recognise Firebird? Would Narasimha, engineered as a half human, half animal weapon, accept him as kindred?

She thinks of the bodily pain of all these legendary forms. How did it feel to have your head wrenched out of your body, to have your limbs fused with something foreign? How did it change you, on the inside?

She can't help but return to the person within—who was Firebird? A trainee like her? With a mother, like hers, who believes in improbable gods?

When she finally drifts off, muscles knotted, she dreams of her body, wired to machines.

Needles slide into her skin. Zap. She is flat on her stomach. Zap. Something crushes the base of her skull. Zap. Her body shakes, table juddering beneath. Zap. Doctors in masks. Zap. Her limbs stretch, joints wrenching out of their sockets. Zap. Zap. Zap.

• • • •

The second time Dr. Grey asks her to go beyond the partition, *try to establish a connection,* Percy is ready for the way he looks and smells.

He gets up as soon as the glass slides open and raises his palms, just as she did. They

have been bandaged with bulky white gauze. She sees the tips of his fingers, slightly curled, tinged blue. He turns his hands so the backs face her. She takes a deep breath. He is saying sorry.

Though there is a growing lump in her throat—she can see blood seeping through the bandages—she forces herself to smile, "Thank you."

She steps in. She has watched many LifeDocs on humans encountering wild species for the first time: This is how trust works. He nods, sits down. His wings retract neatly, long feathers stacking on top of each other. He makes a quiet growling sound.

She fumbles in her pockets, and extends her hand towards him, turning her body away from the glass wall Dr. Grey is observing from. The halves of a walnut sit in her palms. Though she doesn't say it, she is offering him a memory: her mother cracking walnuts between her palms, telling her stories about the gods. She would hold up the perfect halves, declare that they were the brains of a plant, right for imagination, left for logic, and if Percy ate too many, she'd turn into a tree. Percy had brought a jar from home to the academy, rationing them out whenever she feels lonely.

His lips curve. She places the walnut pieces on the table next to him.

When she turns back, he is looking at a bottle on the floor. It has a foldable straw attached to it.

She hesitates. She's not sure what she's supposed to do. *Establish a connection.* She reaches down for the bottle and holds it out to him. His mouth turns down. He shakes his head. Maybe he doesn't want to take it from her.

She puts it down and slides it towards him. He knocks it over with his feet and it rolls away, liquid sloshing inside. He turns his head away, and when she follows his line of sight, she realises he's looking at a tap. He looks back at her, his gaze keen and unsettling. He's trying to tell her something.

The water on the floor may or may not be from that tap. She grabs the bottle, unscrews the lid and sniffs but can't detect any odour. A voice inside her whispers: *It's probably an anaesthetic.* If she listens to it, this voice she's lived with all her life, then there's a benign explanation for everything and she can rest easy.

Ignoring Dr. Grey's watchful eyes, she makes herself walk to the sink and empty the bottle, refilling it with fresh water. She faces him and takes a gulp; it is normal tap water.

She is walking and twisting the lid back on. When she stops in front of him, the lid gets stuck and she jostles the brimming bottle as she tries to pull it free.

Water splashes out onto him.

The roar is deafening. He shoots up, knocks the bottle. The force shoves her back and she loses hold of it. The bottle slips, collides with him, water spills everywhere. The result is instantaneous.

He lunges, wings unfurled, feathers aimed straight at her. She cries out, clenches her eyes shut—

A moment passes.

When she musters the courage to open her eyes, she sees a dozen metal blades, hair-

breadths from her face. She lets out a shuddering breath. They could have cut her face into bits. She can hear someone shouting, feet thudding. He is forced back by strong arms, crowded by white suits, restrained. His eyes don't leave hers. They are alight. But there is something else in the air, the coppery tang of fear, and it is not entirely hers.

As she is coaxed away, body half in shock, shivering violently, she clings to one thought: He'd stopped himself from harming her.

• • • •

Later, after they've given her calming shots, Dr. Grey tells her that the testing period has been terminated: "Tomorrow, you'll be leaving from Gate Z at 700 hours."

Percy hears it through a fog, alarm tamped down by her clouded senses. A dim voice is rising—*no, it's too soon, she needs to see him, speak to him, understand what have they done to him*—but what can she do? Dr. Grey frowns at her; she nods, slinks back to her pod.

It is only after a while Percy realises her jaw aches from gritting her teeth, clamping down the other inexplicable voice that's whispering: *Raze them to the ground.*

• • • •

That night, she dreams of Lanka burning, and Raavan, centre of the maelstrom, ten heads thrown back, laughing.

But then suddenly it's her, dark skin blistering, fire raging around her, trapped. No—not trapped. After months of their poking and prodding, watching and provoking, the white coats will get what they want: The flames leap to the ceiling, shoot through glass, burn firecracker bright. There is an acrid taste in her mouth, an oily darkness gushing up her gullet. She sees shapes beyond, hears the screams. But she can't make herself stop. She roars—

• • • •

Percy jolts awake.

She clutches at her water glass; teeth clattering, she takes huge gulps. Breathes deep. Listens to the silence of her pod. Her skin is hot to the touch, she feels the faint murmurings of a fever. She can't afford to get sick. She opens a new bottle of POMs, mixes it with codeine, swills it down with water. Her dream flashes in front of her eyes. Something is not right with this mission. She tries to shut down the thought. Obey obey obey. But the way Firebird had looked at her—half crazed, half cowed—they had done that to him. And for what?

But another thought swirls in her mind—

This isn't my fight this isn't my fight this isn't my fight

—It is small and ugly. It is the ghost of a memory she keeps buried deep.

She is in primary school, one of a handful of children who aren't pale and perfect. They come from once immigrant families, parents forced into language classes, bodies shoved to the back of lunch queues, served charred potatoes and slop. They are last to be paired off in class. Till they discover what a keen reader Percy is, how she'll do all the group work without being asked. She feels differentiated from those emaciated brown figures, shaved afros and smelly oiled braids hanging down their backs. When they gang up on Sloe, Percy's walk-home companion, a Slummie with a brilliant head for numbers, shove her into a nettle bush, pour toilet-water down her throat, smash her face into another Slummie's crotch: Percy watches, simpers with them, *we're just playing, miss,* really sets herself apart.

The memory lurches to her mind, when she graduates top of her school, when she gets accepted into the academy, when her mother tells her how proud she is: a stinging reminder of her guilt. She pushes it back. She'll do better, next time.

But the next time is here, thrusting itself in front of her face, and Percy feels herself shrinking back, diminishing; she is the scholarship girl, nodding her head, living the quiet life.

Obedience Above All.

• • • •

"Captain, can you show me where we're going? I wasn't briefed on location."

The cockpit feels muggy. Percy keeps her gaze away from the screens. It's been a while since they set off, and Percy hasn't had the nerve to face Firebird, caged in the back.

Rook, the pilot, taps in a passcode and an interactive map unfurls. He points to a small island, zooms in, so she can see large rocks jutting from the ground, treetops swaying in the wind.

"Hades," she breathes out.

"What?"

Percy shakes her head, unsure; something has niggled a memory.

"It's an unnamed island. If you've done your cartography modules, you'll know it doesn't appear on normal maps. I was only given coordinates to fly to."

"Didn't Dr. Grey say there are radiation protocols once we cross a certain point?"

"Hm," the pilot responds, not really paying attention to a first-year trainee. "The Fury is the only plane built with a radiation barrier."

"Do you think," she's hesitant to speak her mind; at the academy, people are always watching, always waiting for you to slip up. Rook could be there to assess her. But Percy remembers Hyena's words about him, and something about his ragged fingernails, the sweat patching his uniform, makes her want to trust him. "Do you think it's near the radiation explosion from Project Oly?"

He finally looks at her, weighing her up, it seems, but his face darkens, "I don't care. I

want to be in and out as fast as possible."

Percy tries to ignore the questions solidifying in her head. They're going to a high radiation area. In a specifically designed aircraft. Why would they be dropping Firebird there? If they need radiation barriers, could he survive in such conditions? She remembers the look on his face when he saw the walnut. She shakes out a few POMs into her mouth, tells herself to focus on the task.

Rook's lips curl, "You know, you're not supposed to eat them like that. Caffeine overload, too many power aides—you can actually die from that."

"They haven't harmed me." Tart juice explodes in her mouth. It tastes exactly like the fruit it mimics.

"People don't have the faintest clue about side effects. They can take years." He pauses to look at the POM container, thinks better of it, "We're not indestructible."

"Is anything?"

He shrugs, turning back to the screen, "I've heard our cargo is."

That sobers her up, "I doubt it."

"The way they've cased it up—you only take that much precaution for something incredibly powerful."

"He's not an it," she whispers. Inside this cockpit, she feels far removed from the sterile walls of the academy. "They've *edited* him . . ." She trails off when she sees his shock, her voice falters, "They didn't tell you?"

His forehead is deeply grooved, "My instructions were to transport cargo to an undisclosed location. I just assumed it would be a weapon."

"This is ridiculous." The words burst out of her, "What if you'd wandered in and he __"

"He what?" His voice is strained, "Who is he? How dangerous are we talking?"

She shakes her head. There is no way she can describe Firebird to someone who has never imagined him. Though her confidentiality oaths loom above her, she feels a sudden need to share it with someone—the doubt and guilt frothing at the pit of her stomach.

"Will you go see him?" she asks, "Please?"

He hesitates, eyes guarded.

She adds, "Only I can print him in and out. It's secure."

He jerks his head. Yes.

• • • •

Rook's fingers shake ever so slightly as he twists a shirt button, "I think he's a weapon."

She tries to keep her voice level, "That they create just to dispose? In a high radioactive zone?"

"Possibly. We don't know for sure we're disposing, there could be something there, a prison, another research facility—or the weapon doesn't work the way it's meant to?"

Feather-blades centimetres from her face. A roar that splinters glass. Hands that sprout knives.

"He's dangerous." It's not a question—Rook's just been to see him, he knows what Firebird is—but she nods. She detects the same wariness, a hesitation borne of years of obedience, in Rook's next words: "Perhaps they can't control him."

She shakes her head, glad he's trusted her enough to voice his thoughts, "That can't be all. They've built in security measures; by that, I mean they've tampered with his memory. He can't speak, can't fly."

Rook looks troubled; perhaps something resonates there. "Was he able to before?"

"I think so."

"I'd heard of Oly but this," he lets out a breath. "How much material would they need to create him? It can't just be his own body; they would need surplus."

She frowns, "What do you mean?"

"Those experiments they did years before, they used the genes of animals and birds, it meant they had tonnes of material to work from. When you're creating mostly from human bodies and inanimate objects, you need to have human material—blood, limbs, organs—on standby."

"Where would they get it from?"

"Grow it in a lab. Or from donors, dead . . . alive."

There are horrors beneath his words that she's too afraid to pry free.

"I had a . . . a friend of mine was registered as a donor. I've never thought much of it—when they pulled him out of the wreckage, I could see his chest, it was moving. But they took him in to surgery and I didn't hear anything for two days."

He looks at her, eyes dark, voice laced with bitter: "He wasn't on military health insurance. Slummies—they can't even afford to live. They told me he died, during the crash. Even though I saw him breathing, I let it go because I knew I caused it, his death. But—what did they do to him, what things did they wrench out . . ."

Percy puts a shaking hand on his shoulder. There are clearly memories he keeps tightly locked inside him; only a glimpse of them knots her throat.

He shudders, takes a deep breath. "I'm going to lie down for a while. Will you watch over the functions, will you be okay?"

"Yes, of course." Her response is automatic.

She watches him go, clambers into the pilot seat, takes deep breaths. She feels sick. She rests her head back and avoids looking at the sky.

• • • •

"Get one of those. Let's make this mission . . . diverse." His voice is slick—expensive aftershave and luxury coffee.

She hears them even through the fortress of glass they have trapped her in, senses pricked to everything around her.

"Is it advisable? Won't it bring undue attention to the project?" A woman's curt voice—sleepless nights and anti-bacterial liquid.

"They'll be so busy lauding our commitment to equality, they won't notice."

"Shall I do a random selection?"

"Hmm. Get a prettier one—in case we have to do press at the end."

"Prettier?"

He laughs. "You're not usually this slow. Lighter skin. Female."

The woman doesn't say anything for a while. "How much do we tell them?"

"Nada—I want none of this getting out. There will be casualties if need be. Do you understand?"

"They are students of this academy."

She can hear the shrug, the crease of expensive suit jacket. "Once they reach Hades, it's all up in the air anyway—assign the new Fury. Grey," he calls out to the woman's retreating figure, "Don't forget you have your appraisal coming up."

• • • •

"We have a problem—"

Percy blinks blearily. Her cheek is numb where she rested it on her closed fist. Her POMs have spilled out on the floor. How long has she been asleep?

"God, I'm so sorry . . ." She trails off as she notices the rigid way Rook is holding himself.

"The engines are malfunctioning."

Fear grips her throat. After a beat, she realises it's not completely her own. It tastes of the sea.

"Do you know what the problem is?"

"Not entirely. I think the radiation barrier is using up more energy than it should, which shouldn't happen because I made sure they checked—double-checked this plane."

She sees his tightness crack a little, and she remembers his words, *They pulled him from the wreckage.* He is gripping the pilot seat with both hands.

She reaches out, keeping her voice calm, emergency drills kicking in, "Let's just worry about the situation now. What are the probabilities?"

"If my guess is correct and we don't lift the barrier, this plane is likely to go down in," he glances at scrolling numbers on the screen, "roughly twenty minutes."

"How close are we to the destination?"

"Very close, actually—I've worked it out. We've just enough time to dive down, dump the cargo and zip out. The second we've passed the zone, we drop the barrier, and it should reboot the main system."

Rook continues speaking, hands gesturing at the screen, but Percy's mind is stuck on *dump the cargo.* They're actually about to do it.

With a jolt, she realises something. Her stomach sinks.

"How's he getting out?"

"What?"

"How's he getting out of the box? I have to print myself in. He can't do that."

Rook doesn't say anything. She sees it flashing on his face: That isn't his priority, he has other problems . . .

Without giving herself time to think, to hide, to act like she's supposed to, she blurts, "I have to be inside when we drop it."

"What—absolutely not—"

She's shaking her head with force, heart thumping loud, "I'm not letting it down otherwise. We might as well turn around right now."

He stares at her for a few taut seconds, letting a huge puff of breath out.

"This is crazy," he mutters to himself, "It's high danger zone, we have no idea what's down there, there's radiation poisoning—"

"I just," she falters, mouth drying, "can't—It's a risk I'm willing to take. It would be cruel to leave him locked inside. You're right, we don't know what's there . . . he should have a chance. *Please."*

She grips his arm, willing him to understand: She *needs* to do this.

He shakes his head, "They're not going to like it and we'll have even less time than before. Everything has to happen bang on schedule for us to get out of this alive. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." She manages a thin smile.

"I've seen them use the hanging stair in army training—we should be able to transport you to the ground and back safely. God, I can't believe I'm agreeing to this."

• • • •

Ten minutes. That's all they've got. She's stolen away from the cockpit—Rook doesn't need her and they've drilled and drilled the plan into memory. She doesn't allow herself to think of the consequences of her actions; she's here on the plane, Dr. Grey, the academy, are miles away.

There's no time left now, and her heart is pounding in her throat, but she has to see Firebird.

He is waiting for her.

When she prints herself into the glass cage, and he walks right up to her, Percy feels not even a flicker of fear. Just relief, that he's still here, real; someone it seems she has known a long time, known intimately.

His bandaged hand reaches towards her, hesitant. It hovers near her face, not quite touching. There is a new softness to his face, beautiful and undemanding. How can he bear to look at her with such kindness?

It comes rearing up—all those thoughts she's tamped down, the reality of what she's about to do, acid rising in her throat—

Suddenly, as if it's been placed there, an image floats into her mind: sun-dappled

water lapping her body, soothing. She feels warm. Safe.

She looks at him with wonder, "It's you, isn't it? These dreams—*you're* sending them to me?"

His lips curve. *The silence under the ocean.*

She remembers the way he reacted when the water splashed him. Dr. Grey's words: *We've edited the design.* The unnamed destination, surrounded by the sea. The way he reacted to the water.

But he belongs in the ocean.

His wings—clipped. Something worse done to his brain.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, breath hitching, "I'm so sorry for what they've done to you."

She reaches forward. Her mother always said tactile contact was the best way to show true feelings. She wants him to know that she's not one of them, that there is at least someone who thinks of him as a person.

Why? So you can feel better? That voice snakes into her thoughts. *When you're the one disposing of him*—she pushes it aside.

When her hand finally makes contact with his skin, it feels like she's plunged it straight into the heart of a flame. The world tilts. Her body crumples.

• • • •

"Any inroads to speech?" Slick, unconcerned words.

"Nothing so far. We're keeping tabs on the girl. There seems to be an unexpected side effect, though she's not showing outward signs of it. According to the MRI, something in her language centres is decaying, we haven't located what exactly, but if it continues, her ability to speak may be damaged severely."

"What a pity, eh, good we got a Brownie. Shame we haven't gained anything from this little experiment, just costs on top of costs. I thought they'd at least be able to communicate. We're losing such a key sample, maybe we should keep him on site, study, cuttings, the usual. The Easties are making tremendous headway with genetic fusion."

"We can't, he's volatile." Her voice is curt, as if they've been over this already.

"The fire? Nothing money can't fix."

"No, we always knew Elysium was a volatile metal, he's basically a sitting nuclear explosion. That fire killed three researchers, and he's tried to escape again—after he met the girl."

"It was your job to tame it."

"It takes time," she snaps. "He's unpredictable."

"At least we haven't wasted as much money as Olympus. Hades is a radioactive dump now. It was to be the gem in our imperial crown."

"Hades was a research facility."

He scoffs, "Just like Firebird is a research subject. We're creating mass-murdering weapons, make no mistake. Nothing benign about what you're doing. I know it comforts you to vilify me in your pretty little head." There is a pause, charged with anger, "How much did you offer this Slummie anyway?"

"You sanctioned the expense."

"There are Slummies gagging at the mouth to volunteer—for free. You saw fit to put a price on their head. So how much is this one going to die for?"

"We're not killing him."

A short bark of laughter. "You're right. We're safely disposing of him in a wasteland where he'll starve to death, or self-combust and destroy everything within a five-mile radius. That's not killing, is it?"

"You know it's not a wasteland. You know what's there."

"A rabble of animals who probably don't know how to speak anymore. This one will fit right in. Mark my words, he's going to be dead within two days. Might as well kill him now and put him in a museum—what a lucrative business that would be, eh? Really give the Easties something to think about."

• • • •

The world is still spinning when she comes to.

Going to die going to die going to die—

The dreams, the images, everything he's tried to tell her slots into place. Click. Click. Click.

The truth, stripped away from the fog of her anxieties, her blind obedience, her cloying desire to be lauded, is staggering.

She is taking him to his death.

This mission is a sham. She hasn't been *chosen.* They don't care if she lives or dies—better if she is buried with the secret. She's expendable, just like Rook, just like the Slummies. That's why they're kept separate, sent on the most dangerous missions: They're human fodder. The academy hides it well—*these Slummies are street-hardened, from criminal homes, they must be schooled with care*—and no one thinks it strange, no one questions anything. When was the last time anyone visited the Slums?

It's all wrong, Firebird, the mission, the academy.

Rook's voice in her earpiece: "Trainee, it's time. I'm opening the delivery catch. It's going to go pretty fast—hold tight."

There's not even a moment to say anything. She hears the sounds of metal groaning open. She looks at Firebird in horror; they need to stop this *now.* He takes a step forward, pupils dilated, wing blades unfurled, a wild cat ready to strike—

They plunge down.

• • • •

For a second, she's back in the chute, before this all began, descending to see the secret breeding under the academy, stomach in knots.

Then the glass box lands with a crunching thud, tilting precariously, lodged between huge slabs of rock. They've both been flung to the floor. The box tips. Hands skidding, she can't stop herself sliding into Firebird. His wings slice her arms and she cries out.

With a noise of distress, he wraps his arms around her. His wings snap shut, but her weight presses him against the glass, and she can see the feathers cutting into his shoulder blades.

She frees a shaking hand, gropes the walls, bloody handprints smudging across the glass, and jabs her thumb on the door. There's a pause—*please let it work please let it work*—before it slides open. They tumble out onto hard ground. The sound of the plane above them is deafening. Wind lashes her body as they struggle up.

There is another sound, faint, familiar . . .

Firebird's head snaps up, nostrils flared. The scent of the sea is overwhelming. A vein flickers on his neck, he curls his fists. Without thought, she launches herself at him, clasping him tight—

"No, please, don't." Her throat clenches. Metal cuts into her flesh, his hackles raised. *Please.* She's seen what happens when water touches him; she can't imagine what will happen if he dives into the sea.

Please.

Her earpiece crackles: *"What the hell are you doing. Key the command."*

Firebird's body relaxes and she loses her grip, their skin slippery with blood.

"Come on, come on, I can't fly closer."

She looks up at the Fury. She can't see Rook, but she knows he sits, heart in throat, one hand on the controls, the other on his mouthpiece, eyes glued to engine control levels, which will be falling with every second. She hears the engines sputter.

Firebird is in front of her, wings loose, eyes downcast: He knows she's brought him to death.

But there is *something* on this island. Something to do with Project Oly, with the academy's illicit experiments on the Slummies. Whatever it is, it's bigger that the OAA, bigger than her quiet life in the academy.

She will always look back to this moment as one which defined her life. Two forked paths unspool in front of her. She can do it, key herself into the Fury, abandon the firebird of the seas, and complete her mission successfully. There's a huge part of her pulling her in this direction: She can bury the guilt; she's come too far to be cast out now. Or—heart skittering, she is almost afraid to free this thought—she can sacrifice the hollow comfort of her pod and stay with a doomed metal-man, who has shown her the truth, who she owes something to, who is *kindred.*

She thinks of Sloe and the line of Slummies disappearing into the wall.

She thinks of her mother, sitting cross-legged, sewing marigolds into a garland for the gods, telling her: *The biggest mistake we make is thinking that we are powerless.*

The earpiece screeches, Rook's fear is palpable.

A split second to decide.

She opens her mouth—

"Trainee, please, key in."

—in that moment, she realises her throat is clamped shut. A phlegmy substance clots at the back.

The sound of the engine changes.

"I'm sorry."

Rook, with his troubled memories, whisper weighed down with blood—she wishes there was some way to tell him: *I choose this. This is my fight.*

The Fury speeds away and disappears in seconds: the best military model. Yet it malfunctioned. Yet here she was.

She hears herself gasping. She has no idea what she's done; she has no idea what comes next.

The only thing she knows with certainty is this: For once, she's had the courage to think for herself, unafraid; to not close her eyes to something terrible; to choose to do the right thing.

As she shifts to look at Firebird, at his large tiger eyes, the slight curve of his mouth, she hears a voice in her mind, clear like a searing metal brand: *They're coming for us.*

Everything goes up in flames.

A ring of fire, and the two of them in the middle, together. Come what may.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isha Karki works in publishing and lives in London. She grew up on a healthy dose of Bollywood, fanfiction, and dystopian literature. She is interested in post-colonial narratives, feminist voices, myths and fairy tales, South Asian literature, and SFF that isn't white-washed. "Firebird" is her first published story. She's on Twitter as @IshaKarki11.

As Long as It Takes to Make the World

Gabriela Santiago | 6,000 words

I. Fall

The poets of the Whole World saw farmers cover crops with shrouds of spiderwebby synth-wool to protect them against the frost that stole silver-soft over bonfire leaves turned brown and brittle, and they called fall a time of dying. But The Land is built of living memory, and the preservitors that govern it and the farmers who till its soil know that no part of it can die, only be remade in different ways. It is still a time of lasts: last day when the cool water of the stream is a relief from the heavy heat, last day with no jackets or gloves, last harvest of tomatoes, of corn, of even pumpkins and squash.

On the morning of the last market, the sun teases its rays over the horizon as if this too may be its final appearance, and frosted grass crunches underfoot as a small girl makes her way to the cab of a battered blue truck, her cheeks chafed red and her hands even redder around a steaming mug of cider, her breath writing white curlicues in the air. She sits next to an older woman in dirt-stained overalls, a jean jacket, a John Deere baseball cap, and a long red scarf. The woman murmurs prayer-like a line from a poem by Wendell Berry, last of the great farmer-poets of the World That Was:

How long does it take to make the woods? / As long as it takes to make the world.

Outside, other men and women bang the back of the truck shut, sealing in the wooden crates of vegetables.

The little girl presses her nose against the window, fogging the glass. She looks at The Land, and The Land looks back.

Fall is also a time of firsts, and this is their first goodbye.

• • • •

Who makes The Land?

The preservitors' hands are soft and pale, unlined except for the scars where they gave their thumbs to the reality matrix. Their hands push buttons and type commands, tighten the boundaries of the empty highway The Land wears like a belt. Even they do not, cannot, know exactly what the coming seasons will bring; a percentage of chaos is necessary if their plans are to come to fruition. And that means that the excesses of summer must be pruned away, no matter that they were celebrated as successes at the time. The Land loses a sapling sugar maple in the Upperfield, surrounded by grass stalks with seedpods fuzzy as caterpillars. It loses black-eyed Susans bold as brass and Queen Anne's lace delicate as doilies at the edge of the deep ditch across the highway. It loses a bend in the stream in the Bottomfield, a moss-covered log that the children raced leaf boats over to capsize against the force field, and the preservitors do not mourn.

Who makes The Land?

The hands of the farmers are chapped, cracked, and callused; dirt has ground its way so deep into the skin that no scrubbing can remove it from the whorls of fingers and palm where it swirls like a map of black canals. Raspberry reds and purples blotch like bruises and smears of blood. The fingertips of some of the kids are ink-stained from the black walnuts they hurl over the highway in moments of defiance they can't yet understand. The farmers' hands wave goodbye to the little girl and the older woman, and then they turn to what the preservitors' hands have left them, and make it what they can. There are cold-stunted fruits and roots that only they will taste, cut and boiled and canned on an open fire. There are old trees to fell and split into logs for future fires. There are holes to mend in the sides of the trailers that ring the mid-hill clearing, new blankets to be sewn and old ones to be cut up for coats, and faded stories to be copied down onto new paper to pass the time in the coming cold. The Land does not offer up these things, but it does not stop the farmers' hands as they work their making and remaking on its body, and perhaps that is permission.

Who makes The Land?

The Land is not saying.

• • • •

The little girl rides her homemade bike down the empty highway, wheels thrumming on smooth blacktop. Has The Land felt her return? It sends no wind to whip her hair, and she stares not at The Land but beyond it, at the preservitors' holographic landscapes that play across the protective force field: a giant's quilt of gold and green squares, corn and soybean fields filling out the view all the way to the horizon. She turns a corner, and there are gently rolling hills of pasture wound through by creeks, dotted with willows and cows. Clouds eddy across a sky that is currently grey but that she has seen blue, and several times tornado green. She smells clover, diesel, and manure, and it all seems as real as anything else she saw today, but the girl knows it is not, and she frowns out at the empty starless space that is so hard to believe in. She tells herself a story where she could slip out into the illusion, run by herself between the rows of corn, dip her toes into the rolling streams, feel the scabby bark of its trees on her knees and hands. A great explorer, like Sacajawea in the days of the Whole World, when the only obstacles were mountains and rivers.

She rides and rides away from The Land on the highway, and one view slides into the next like butter, but soon enough the road curves all the way 'round and she has not made it to the U, the Mill, the Dealers' Room, or any other of the Halfway Worlds. She has come back to The Land.

It sends a chill wind to ruffle her hair, reminding her to run along the ravines one more time before the true cold sets in.

II. Winter

In winter, the farmer families all bundle into two joined trailers to sleep, the kitchen and the library. The wood ovens spread heat thick and sticky like pancake batter; the library lets in a stream of cold air from a high window. Restless children travel back and forth throughout the night, burning-hot boys kicking off their blankets to flop next to cold feet, froze-fingered girls curling up against their grandmothers' backs, warm breath on the back of their necks. Their days, too, seesaw between too hot and too cold: a bitter chill cuts to the bone only to be dispelled by the sweat of shoveling snow from the road, sweaters are inevitably shed in the greenhouse only seconds before some fool opens the door and lets in a small snowstorm. The kitchen holds an industrial freezer powered by the generator the preservitors gave them several years back, but once the temperature falls below freezing they turn it off and store the food in the deep snow of the adjacent ravine, surrounded by barbed wire. Supper is tomato soup, heavy on corn and red peppers, a taste that summons up summer like a magic spell.

The preservitors visit weekly, walk the farmers in figure eights up across the width and breadth of the Upperfield and Bottomfield, the forested hill between with the mid-hill clearing, the highway and the stream. Observation is action. Feedback is crucial to maintain the pattern. They must ensure that the farmers see each snow-laden bough, each arm of ice spanning over the stream, each chirping chickadee that the preservitors paid for with their thumbs and hours of algorithms.

Once the farmers were allowed to make these walks on their own, but seven years ago there was an ice storm that coated every branch, bud, and pine needle in exquisite detail, catching the sun like a forest spun in glass. The farmers looked out the windows at the icy road downhill, and chose to stay inside. So they are no longer trusted.

The preservitors gave their thumbs for The Land. The farmers only live there.

• • • •

What does The Land want?

The preservitors tell the children that The Land wants nothing. It cannot want anything. It is not alive. It is a discrete combinatorial system. It reflects only what is put into it. On the winter days that they visit The Land, they hold a school, where the preservitors teach the children about chaos theory, the laws of thermodynamics, and the rise of nanotechnology. They send the children out to take samples of snowflakes and demonstrate under a microscope that their current algorithm results in pattern repetition only once in every five thousand flakes; soon, they hope for a breakthrough that will allow them to make each one truly unique. They make speeches about the World That Was, and the World That Could Be, a completely connected universe that would spin out into forever. They give the children tests, and the little girl notices how some children are treated differently after the tests, how her biggest brother is taken for private talks. How he begins to pick at his food, and bite his lip, and stare out the window at The Land as if it is a difficult math problem he just might solve.

What does The Land want?

The farmers tell their children that they can never know what The Land wants, only what it needs. The Land is a language that must be learned, verbs of blood and sweat and the way your hands catch and rub against the wooden crates as you cart them uphill. In the World That Was, their ancestors hedged their bets with prayers and cider poured over tree roots and poor man's almanacs, and the farmers of The Land hedge theirs by never stating outright that The Land is not alive. They look out from the library at The Land buried under algorithmically sculpted snowflakes, and they read the words of Wendell Berry to their children: *And so you make the farm / That must be daily made, or it / Will not exist.*

Through winter the farmer families gather in the musty library—nests of blankets and half-read books, a coveted plaid couch and a corduroy armchair—and read the oft-recopied books of the Whole World, Chaucer and Rees Brennan and Achebe. When night falls and candles are insufficient to light the pages, they sit in moonlit darkness and tell The Land into being: stories of spotting green-blue ducks in the stream, of fingers sliced off by hastily wielded hand hoes, of cottonwood trees sending small tufts of white spinning across the highway to collect on the force field in clumps like clouds. They tell of the winter when the doors froze shut, the spring the lower fields were flooded and they lost all the crops, the summer that tornados tore through the corn fields but left the sweet potatoes undamaged, the fall where watermelons lasted till October. They tell every blade of grass and bit of dirt and stone, each board broken from a crate and left to mark a row of seeds.

The preservitors monitor this feedback, edit it for desirable characteristics. But at midnight the kids slip away unseen to the shingle pile under the old oak tree, and tell their own tales. They tell stories of falling-apart forts and tree-houses, of digging for treasure down by the stream, of the Dinosaur Bones: old broken machines dumped in the farthest ravine, at first as a potential stockpile of matter for the reality matrix, but then forgotten. The tractor and the combine and the binder, all alien contours and blades, rusting sagging metal and broken glass, blue and red and green paint that they can peel off in great long strips. Mud and grass claiming the deflated wheels, while wild grapes and Virginia creeper clamber over the rest, half the tractor forever lost to poison ivy. The children tell of the times they played Warship, the times they played Army Tank, the times they played Space Station, risking tetanus to scramble to the very top of those great silent beasts and grab a vine, leap out over the ravine and for a moment, fly.

The adult farmers do not speak of these gatherings, but they do not stop them either. Children have always made their own secret worlds.

What does The Land want?

The Land feels the equations run through it, and it listens to the stories and poetry that float over its barren fields, and what The Land thinks of either it does not tell, only sends more snow to fall on the ring of trailers in the middle of the hill.

• • • •

All children are siblings until they leave The Land for more than a week, at which point they metamorphize into cousins, butterflies leaving caterpillars behind. The cousins return in rocket ships each Christmas, fragile and sickly as insects in a winter storm; the preservitors say there are no significant differences in the governing principles of nanotechnology between the worlds, but they are not there when the cousins cough blood. Yet the cousins' faces are full of smiles and their arms are full of treasures: hard candy in bright plastic wrappers from the Mill, books from the U that are typed rather than handwritten, small relics—flashlights, action figures, pocket knives—of the World That Was from the Dealers' Room.

In the first few weeks, there is often tension between the oldest siblings and the youngest cousins, the former unsure of the decisions they must soon make, the latter desperate to remain confident in the decisions they have made. The cousins bungle chores or slack off; the siblings taunt them with their lost knowledge of The Land's twists and turns. A few fistfights usually settle the matter, and soon they are bounding together through the forest again, each seeing with new eyes the sparkle of the snow, the stark silhouette of the trees, the tantalizing dip and rise of the trails down the hill.

One day an icy snowball sends the little girl flying, landing flat on her back in a bank of snow, looking up at all the stars in the world winking through the snowflakes, the world flickering back and forth from white to red. Her heart thuds against her chest and her breath comes short as she stares up into that ivory sky that seems to go on forever, and she doesn't understand how people did it back in the Whole World, how they could look up at the sky and know that it really did go on forever, that this snowbank was only one snowbank in an uncountable multitude of feather-soft snowbanks each slightly different, that there was an infinite universe with every corner filled with beauty and they would never get to see all of it—

Her friends hurry to her, and her tears are freezing on her cheeks as they carry her in for hot mint tea.

She doesn't understand how the people who lived in the World That Was could ever keep their hearts from bursting.

• • • •

The cousins leave with all the best treasures of The Land, pouches of dried mint and marjoram muffling the jars of rhubarb jam that clink together like jewels in their backpacks. Their parents stuff their pockets with wax paper twists of molasses, of crushed mint leaves mixed with corn syrup, of candied ginger root chews. In the days ahead they will have these as a taste of home, or a nest egg to be bartered on the black market—the preservitors permit expatriates to take souvenirs, but for personal use only.

A grandfather hands a side of salted crow meat to the cousin going to the Mill, and

reminisces about the days when the matter surplus meant they were allowed to have livestock, how each cousin left The Land with a dozen speckled brown eggs swathed gently in golden straw, and lived high on the hog for a whole year on the proceeds as long as they didn't give in to the urge to have an omelet.

The little girl watches her biggest brother watching the cousins leave, and she wonders if they got eggs again, if that would make him stay.

III. Spring

The long winter has weakened all the farmers, but death waits until spring, until the snow is lost in slushy mud and dandelion shoots poke up above the ground, waving tiny green flags of hope. Too late for the great-grandmother and her great-granddaughter, ninety years old and nine months old, lungs worn out and lungs not yet worn in, lungs turned wheezing and desperate in the cold winter air, then drowned in spring damp before the doctors could be called from the U. The Land has no cemetery; the preservitors come for their bodies instead, take them away to be fed into the reality matrix. The great-grandmother's granddaughter, the great-granddaughter's mother, argues for a burial plot beneath the hickory trees that ring the trailers, but the preservitors say no; no matter the generations they have lived and breathed and eaten The Land, they are immigrants here. The Land cannot yet recognize itself in their bodies, cannot yet know how to digest their matter. The great-grandmother and great-granddaughter must be prepared by the nanobots of the reality matrix before they can be returned to The Land.

The little girl watches the raindrops fall and swell the stream, the tender leaves of trees unfurl in the lightest shades of green, the sparrows and chickadees return in force to the trees, and she calls them all by the names of the old woman and the baby. She kisses the leaves and stays outside to let the rain run down her face until her parents call her in, and she learns to sing back the songs of the birds through the library window, and she wonders if this is any better or worse than a headstone would be.

• • • •

How do you leave The Land?

To leave The Land, the farmers must call the Parade, and so each spring like clockwork, a representative arrives in strange bright clothes and stilts. How much of the outfit is science and how much superstition is hard to say; no one besides the Parade knows how they convince The Land to spin a razor-thin land bridge out across the sea of nothing. Even the preservitors are confined to rocket ships and their costly fuel. The farmers stand off to the side as the representative takes soil samples and air readings; they glance back and forth, not certain if they're allowed to look. The kids, of course, gape shamelessly, and whisper to each other; the older ones hold forth on the trips they have taken with the Parade, how they pressed their faces against the cab window and watched

the earth become a flowing river of black asphalt barely lighter than the vacuum beyond it, how a distant sun seemed to silhouette the members of the Parade in front of them, tottering forward on unsteady stilts, waving instruments in the barely-there air.

After the representative of the Parade leaves, the kids scavenge broken shovels and dull hand hoes that the grown-ups will not miss, sneak away to scythe out foxholes and trenches in the same dirt the Parade man prods each time, deep in the shade of the thorn locust trees just off the Upperfield. The earth fails to yield the secrets of the Parade, but it is fun to pretend, and easy enough once they get down to the Errors, programming bugs that the preservitors try to bury where they won't be seen. Dirt clumps in Koch snowflakes and Mandelbrot sets, or the same earthworm climbing under the same limestone rock riddled with crinoid column fossils, seven times in a row. The children line up their treasures, compare them, contest each other's claims to unearthing them, and then smash them into pieces.

If they manage to get down past seven feet before getting called off to cut spinach and pluck nasturtiums and generally be pulled into a day's worth of work that may mean a rainstorm washes the whole thing away—if they manage to get that far, the game changes to "digging to China," where "China" means the Mill or the Dealers' Room or the U or any other world but their own. They pass the time telling each other stories of what they will do when they reach the other world, the things they will see, the creatures they will face. How they will evade the preservitors and make their way home, or sail off into the sky.

How do you leave The Land?

The preservitors would prefer that no one leave The Land until its borders have stretched and shifted so far that the empty highway links up with the roads of another world, so far that a tunnel dug into the land would surface in another world and not the empty void of space. To hasten on that day, the preservitors descend on The Land in spring like a flock of geese to see how well the farmers' feedback has maintained their world's form and function. This year they are pleased, and moreover wish to punish poor feedback at the Mill; there is talk of adding back the moss-covered log in the stream, and perhaps another few yards of water. The farmers argue against it, saying it will only worsen the erosion problem; perhaps another yard of gooseberry bushes instead? The preservitors huddle, pour over their historical records, those last snapshots of the World That Was. The Land is a tree they must bend and trim until it fits precisely inside those final moments when the world was whole.

But all this calibration and debate is just background noise to the real work that must be done, rising at dawn to a world made slick and jewel-shining with dew, seedlings to be transplanted from the greenhouse and seeds to be shaken out of their packets and pushed finger-deep into the freshly tilled soil, six inches apart, watered gently. Fresh straw and fall leaves must be carefully mulched. The synth-wool is kept ready; who knows when The Land will choose to send its last treacherous frost?

A few acres, as always, are left to clover; a much easier way to fix nitrogen in the soil

than asking the preservitors for fertilizer. Some grown-ups bemoan this necessary loss of crop space, but the children are glad of it; fewer vegetables to plant and weed, and more red clover for them to pluck and suck that minuscule drop of nectar suspended at the end of the tiny purple-white tubes.

The first long haul of a harvest is for the strawberries, rows and rows of wide green leaves with red berries peeking through, rubies and emeralds set between bands of golden straw. A late frost kills the first buds despite the synth-wool, but their straggling-behind sisters spread their white petals below a warmer sun. The children squat low and move down the rows to harvest them in reed baskets, gorging themselves on the unspoiled halves of strawberries snacked upon by picnic bugs and Japanese beetles, ruining their appetites for dinner as they glory in the taste of the too-ripe but not quite rotten fruits whose elixir is too delicate to ever be carried to market. More than a few adults ruin their dinner as well, and do not regret it.

How do you leave The Land?

Sometimes the only way to get out of The Land is to go deeper into it, away from the scramble and sweat and the workday songs, into a trodden down circle of dirt surrounded by jewelweed and shaded by a black walnut tree. The little girl looks up at the jewelweed and the tree and the sky—today it is robin's egg blue beyond the leaves—and thinks about the way the grown-ups plan, farmers and preservitors. The woods in spring look to her the way the woods in spring have always looked to her, but the grown-ups are always saying that the sugar maples take so much more space than they did a few years ago, that the stream has washed away so much of the bank, that the hickory trees halfway up the hill used to not be so hollow. And she has seen, in history classes, the way The Land formed, meadows to scraggly saplings to tall trees, the tallest falling down for meadows to form and saplings to grow again.

To speed this change of goods / I spare the seedling trees, / And thus invoke the woods, / The genius of this place.

The jewelweed hides a patch of wild strawberries, small as the nail of the little girl's pinky finger, mushy and not quite sweet. She pops them in her mouth and imagines The Land coursing through her, the nanobots that have been rain and dirt and berries and the bodies of an old woman and a baby. She crushes them with her tongue against the back of her front teeth, and looks up at the sky and the supposedly changing trees, and thinks about the old becoming the new becoming the old and new again.

The Land holds her, and looks down upon her, and if it keeps its thoughts to itself, it also lets the sun shine bright and lull her to sleep.

IV. Summer

The little girl thinks that you can only really see The Land in summer: the Bottomfield, with its stretch of thick forest and the twisting stream hidden deep in a ravine where the kids still sneak away to skinny dip and catch squirming tadpoles; the trees all curled

around fields of corn, potatoes, tomatoes, okra, peppers, onions, and green peas. The Upperfield, with even more corn and potatoes, and long rows of chokeberries, blackberries, peaches, apples, and pears. Unbidden, The Land presses against the highway, expanding its boundaries to accommodate a stand of six-foot sunflowers with petals in yellow and orange.

With her feet in the mud of the Bottomfield, the little girl feels like she is standing cupped in the palm of God, and with them in dry dust of the Upperfield, as though she could fall up into that endless blue sky.

The sun bakes down on both equally, makes shade a balm in the Upperfield where the dust dries choking in the farmers' throats, their skin cracking like the upper crust of the crumbly grey-brown dirt beneath their feet; in the Bottomfield, it is like breathing underwater, feeling your blood slowly simmer until a sip of stream water slides down your throat, a mercy of winter's memory. The farmers work all day checking rain gauges, digging irrigation ditches until their hands are blistered between each finger, uncoiling miles of decades-old nearly-dead rubber hose. The kids work right alongside, plucking caterpillars off tomatoes and fennel, cutting their hands open as they yank away brittle unbearing raspberry canes, steady and sure but with one ear open for any adult to let them know they aren't needed just that second. They'll be off like a shot halfway through the sentence, clothes flapping in the wind and bare feet thumping down onto the dirt as they speed off to the ravines, the stream, the woods with their wild black raspberries, the Dinosaur Bones.

The little girl runs off with the rest of them, and as she runs, she thinks of herself as a single synapse shooting through the mind of The Land, a tiny flash of light in an infinite sea of shifting stars, and she screams at the tops of her lungs as she races down the hill, and she does not know who she is trying to make hear her: her parents, the preservitors, or The Land, whose voice she can hear singing in every hum of the cicadas deep within the trees.

Her brother is not there to see the summer, all the matter bursting forth and unfolding with even more enthusiasm than in spring. He went away in the preservitors' rocket ship on their last spring visit. He is too far away to hear her, even if sound traveled in a vacuum.

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When will The Land enter the New World?

The newest preservitor is careful to keep his sketches in his cabin in the control room, anchored on the underbelly of The Land, no windows to let in the empty black not-sky. If there were windows, the most he could glimpse would be the sifters, drifting by in search of invisible swarms of nanobots to trap and tag as inert or feral before delivering them to the preservitors to be reprogrammed and entered into the reality matrix. After the culling for rocket fuel, there may even be enough left for a teaspoon of nutrient-enriched earth.

He rubs at the backs of his hands. The tendons of his fingers still ache from the hours of reprogramming it takes for even a small batch of ferals. His thumbs still ache, even though they are no longer there. Looking at the sketches, at the pictures of The Land he drew when he could still bear to hold a pen after an eight-hour shift, the enormity of the task hits the newest preservitor all over again.

It's the view from the rocket window on approach: black on black, only a thin crack of light to betray its presence. The Land hangs in space like an orphaned Magritte painting, an inverted teardrop backlit by the sun—not the real sun, of course. That is gone with the World That Was. But the engines burn bright on the circling satellite, giving a glow to the holographic sky dome and setting the jagged edges of earth on fire as they scissor downwards to a point so sharp it could cut steel. There is less than a mile of earth, dirt and pebbles trapped under a force field that glimmers in the light like a layer of frost.

There is no erosion here.

There are no layers of rock, bent and compressed by the titanic force of shifting plates. There is no magma oozing up between cracks, eager to seek the surface. There is no mantle or core. There are no magnetic poles: a compass would point directly to the electromagnets turning in the preservitor headquarters, a white box jutting from the side of The Land in his sketch like a piece of exposed bone.

There is no north on the Halfway Worlds.

He can never show these sketches to his family. Not even the ones who have glimpsed a similar view from the cab windows of the semi-forbidden Parade. They might start drawing their own sketches. The Land would—not know, precisely, but . . . the information would become a part of it. The feedback would be contaminated. The creation of the New World would be delayed. It is dangerous, even, that he has made it for himself.

When will The Land enter the New World?

The truck rumbles off the Parade onto the highway and into a storm, The Land lashing the trees and the cornstalks as if it could shake the rainfall off of them. The truck rattles and growls in desperation as it fights its way against the wind to the mid-hill clearing, and the little girl must cling to her aunt as the gale plucks at their limbs, desperate hands trying to pull them apart. A sentinel in the kitchen door beckons them to the pit dug below, and they all huddle there in the too-early darkness, in the sweet cold smell of the damp earth, in the susurration of whispers against the medley outside of shouts and breaking branches, cracking glass and shrieking metal, as a few women and men try to secure their belongings against The Land's upheaval.

There are candied ginger chews for the children, and small cups of cold chocolate from the Mill, and their parents keep their arms tight around all their shoulders and count their heads again and again, strain their ears for the sounds outside. The great-grandparents tell tall tales of the storms they have seen, and the children listen, wide-eyed.

It is the job of grown-ups to worry. It is the job of children to listen to stories.

When will The Land enter the New World?

The Land is not saying. It does not run on the timetables of farmers or preservitors. Its definition of time was written in the bones of the planet that is no longer beneath it.

• • • •

When the farmers emerge and see what The Land has done, the scenery scattered as if in a giant's tantrum, the windshield of the truck smashed in by a hickory branch, they all take in a deep breath as one, as if they could pull the strength and stillness of the post-storm The Land into their bones. Their shoulders tighten, as if The Land grows heavier above them. There are no tears.

The Land is not cruel. The Land is The Land.

The preservitors below observe the readouts on their computer screens. True randomness is important. Excess order must not be imposed. They can learn from their mistakes here, spotting the flaws in the equations that led to too uniform a destruction. They can provide a more realistic experience the next time. And as they input more precise instructions, so The Land becomes more precise in its output. So The Land expands into the future, into the New World, into the World Whole Once More.

The fact that the truck is smashed, and shipments of food must be sent by rocket rather than the Parade, is a bonus.

• • • •

Perhaps a better question would be simply: *Will* The Land enter the New World?

Or: Why should it?

Or: What else could we do with those clouds of nanobots swarming through space, if we stopped clinging to the World That Was?

• • • •

The girl is no longer a little girl. It has been less than a year, but she feels her smallness slipping away, persistent questions scurrying under her skin instead, making her itch and fret under the summer sun. And so, even though it is against the rules, she takes the book of Wendell Berry poems from the library and walks down to the stream.

The girl sits on an overturned tree, roots like reaching hands. She opens the book, turns it to the page she wants, looks up. The light plays over the little rivulets, water-skimmers tracing lazy figure eights across its surface, leaves crowding the little gaps between smooth stones.

She wants to stay. She wants to go. She wants to freeze this moment forever in time, and she wants to sprint headfirst into the future. She wants to cling to this ground she knows like she knows her own body, and she wants to touch a world where she knows nothing at all.

She looks up at the ledge, a crumbling clay cliff with a young elm clinging to the top of its bank, the sun setting in the nettles and jewelweed around it, and she feels all the love she has for The Land like a never-ending ache in her chest.

And The Land cannot know words or kindness or fair play, but she thinks it may still love her back.

And so she hedges her bets, opens her book, and speaks her prayer to the stream:

We join our work to Heaven's gift,
Our hope to what is left,
The fields and woods at last agree
In an economy
Of widest worth.
High Heaven's Kingdom come on earth.
Imagine Paradise.
O dust, arise!

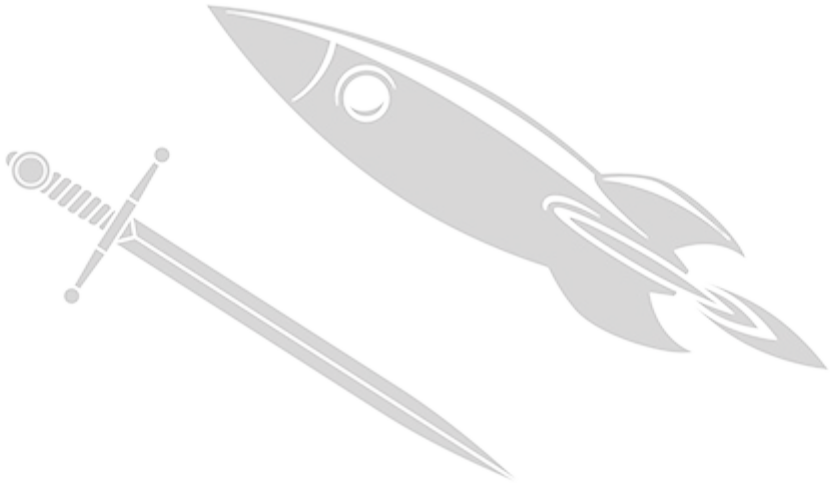
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gabriela Santiago grew up in Illinois, Montana, Florida, and Yokosuka, Japan; these days she lives in St. Paul, where she spends her days professionally playing with kids at the Minnesota Children's Museum. She is a graduate of Macalester College and the Clarion writing workshop, as well as a proud member of Team Tiny Bonesaw. Her fiction has appeared in *Betwixt* and *Black Candies – Surveillance: A Journal of Literary Horror;* her Black Candies story is also available in audio form on Episode #16 of the *GlitterShip* podcast. In addition, she has a story forthcoming in *States of Terror, Volume 3*. You can find her online at writing-relatedactivities.tumblr.com or @LifeOnEarth89 on Twitter.

ORIGINAL FLASH FICTION

EDITED BY BERIT ELLINGSEN



An Offertory to Our Drowned Gods

Teresa Naval | 1,200 words

The bodies floating on the streets look fuller than Johnnyboy feels. They are pink and bloated, like the click-flash tourists who once inhaled the spirits of their cities. No one talks about the drownings, but Johnnyboy's father sometimes puts his hands together and whispers to the newly baptized. *The water carries sound much faster,* he says, *this is why no one has secrets any more.* The tide brings in so many things: keyboards, used condoms, crucifixes, textbooks. The tide is how Johnnyboy finds a name—a faded basketball jersey, the number seven, *Johnnyboy* in purple lettering.

Water is an old friend collecting debts, Johnnyboy's father says, as they scramble to reach higher ground. The twenty-third floor of a call center agency is home for the night, and the scent of mildew and old cigarette smoke lulls them to sleep. The water is silent for now, but soon it will shift and grow angry, and so must they. One day, the water will reach the sky, and Johnnyboy will swim with the stars.

Johnnyboy's father wraps a sheet of plastic around them. He says the first thing water collects is memory. *We are used to being eroded,* he tells her, *we are used to waiting for the dove and the olive branch and the god saying this land is blessed, this land is for you to take.* But the rain did not stop after forty days. Still, the altars burned with incense. For years, it was only water and smoke, tide and candle, until they understood that some gods could be drowned.

The second thing water collects is love, Johnnyboy tells herself. The man she calls her father is not her own. She found him half-asleep in the water, mumbling about his children. He will die soon, maybe tomorrow, and maybe she will mourn for all the nameless things the water has already collected from them.

"Nering?" the father asks, and Johnnyboy says *no.*

He laughs, *What is your name, then.* It is not a question. Johnnyboy doesn't answer.

The father hands her a photograph, wet and crumpled. Three smiling faces. A theme park. Johnnyboy hears the bubblegum music through the paper.

"Two daughters," the father says, "twins."

He says, "This is what the water collects last."

• • • •

Johnnyboy remembers the iron gates, the mud on her mother's shoes, the flooded basement, the overturned garden tables, the sirens. They had been summering in her mother's old home—an ancestral fortress, too cavernous for Johnnyboy's modern father, too byzantine, too fated to be the house that would fall first. They hadn't been allowed to leave the compound, but Johnnyboy always snuck out through the maids' door to shoot tin cans with the children outside.

One day, when her parents rushed an ailing grandparent to the hospital, Johnnyboy

snuck the children in through the same door. They left muddy footprints on the polished floors, threw half-eaten macopas and apples in powder rooms, giggled in the hallways (loud enough to rattle the ghosts of her mother's ancestors). It had been the day before the storm, and the sun was so bright that neither Johnnyboy nor the children wanted to play in the gardens. The children eyed a chocolate cake in the refrigerator, and Johnnyboy led them in eating it with their hands. It was sundown when the children left.

The storm started at 3:08 in the morning.

Johnnyboy remembers this well. As her mother raised her hand to punish her for defiling holy ground (the frosting left stains as deeply as blood), the lights were killed and the television in the other room died mid-theme song. It was as if the entire estate had been murdered in its sleep. Johnnyboy's father ran to find a flashlight. Johnnyboy's mother whispered to the old gods. Johnnyboy tried to count the seconds in between the lightning and the thunder.

Soon, her parents rounded up all the people they could still find in the house: the half-blind grandmother, the gardener, three maids, the cook and her infant son, the stuttering guard. The gardener had been trying to pry open the basement door when they heard gunshots. Johnnyboy's father took the guard's baton, broke the lock, and let them in.

"S-S-S-S-S-Sir!" the guard said, following him down. Johnnyboy clung to her mother. One of the maids started crying. The gardener made sure the door was shut closed.

Johnnyboy felt water seep into her socks, then into her pants. The basement was half-submerged already, but the hatch was well hidden, and they would be safe, her mother said.

"But what was that sound?" Johnnyboy asked.

"Nothing," her father said, "nothing at all."

"Go to bed, anak," her mother added, "the rain will stop in the morning."

• • • •

There was no morning.

Johnnyboy remembers waking up underneath her favorite mango tree. She was alone, maybe dreaming, maybe dead. There was a faint throbbing in her head that made her think of the time she was bitten by a dengue mosquito. Her eyes tried to adjust in the haze. The ancestral home seemed to melt before her, paint running down an old wall, until not even ghosts remained.

The rain was not forgiving, but Johnnyboy did not expect it to be. She wandered, past the drowning plants, past the drowning home, past shattered china and animal bones. She wandered until she was cold and drenched and gray, until she saw the Cuban heel smeared with mud, until she saw her mother's hands clasped against her breast. There was a hole that went through her hands, through her chest. Not even her gods had saved her.

Her father was probably in the basement. He was probably killed slowly, without

respect. He probably had enough time to say the rosary as his lungs filled with water.

Where were the others? Johnnyboy thought. A vague sense of horror had blossomed inside her, but nothing concrete, nothing absolute. She didn't know where to go, and considered sleeping beside her mother's corpse, until a voice cried out her name. (Today, she no longer remembers it. She has been Johnnyboy ever since.)

"I'm sorry," the voice added. In her line of vision stood a young boy, one of the children she used to play with. He looked older than her mother's corpse. He tried to smile at her. There was mud on two of his teeth.

He said, "You have to run."

He said, "They will get you, too."

• • • •

In the city, they talked about the murders in old money homes. In the city, they talked about how the floods turned red because of all the blood. In the city, the rain was as thick and as heavy as blood, but tainted, dirty. The water was different here—it was hotter and thicker and reeked of sewage. In the city, no one talked about their own dead. In the city, Johnnyboy became Johnnyboy.

• • • •

Johnnyboy remembers all this, remembers everything the water has taken from her, remembers what she must offer to appease the swelling ocean. She is already part of it; where she ends, the water begins.

In the morning, Johnnyboy pushes the man out a window. His body hits the water softly, as if the water already knows how to collect things gently, tenderly, as if it is saying, *I have been waiting for you.* Maybe the man and his children will meet someplace where the oceans end. Maybe heaven, Johnnyboy thinks, maybe America.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teresa Naval's stories are often for and about the Philippines, where she was born and raised. She now attends university in Connecticut and spends most of her time converting Fahrenheit to Celsius. Teresa likes mythology and video games with multiple endings.

Other Metamorphoses

Fabio Fernandes | 380 words

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself in his bed.

He hadn't been transformed into a gigantic insect.

Disappointed, the small velociraptor started to weep. And braced himself to enter dreamtime again.

• • • •

Samsa was a member of that elusive caste known as the Oneironauts. Dream travelers —people who, since the dawn of time, were able to master their dreams and bend them at their will.

For them, dreamscapes could be the doors to alternate realities. Most of these places could be accessed at will by them; some, not so easily. And even fewer could be tampered with.

Samsa was one of the few who could travel to other realities with his mind and become one with them. He already had done so many times, like that series of nightly oneiric escapades that came to be known to his Oneironaut sisters and brothers as his Jurassic Dreams. That was when he woke up as a man-sized beetle.

But that wasn't so easy.

Somewhere along the oneiric corridors, Samsa had lost his original body. Now he was trying to swap it back.

Not an easy task, though.

When weaving through the dreamways, an Oneironaut must be on alert at all times, lest she be swept by the undercurrents and lose herself in memories, dreams, reflections. For it is one thing to change bodies, another (no less frequent and no less dangerous) to swap minds.

Fortunately this hadn't happened to Samsa. Not that he could totally control it.

He should know better, though; the Oneironauts scanned the dreamways in search of potential criminals, people who used their skills for personal gain and risked destroying the fabric of all realities.

So, as Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a small dinosaur.

This isn't it, he thought.

Again the dreamtime.

It took him half a dozen attempts until he got back his tall, dark-eyed, high-cheekboned, rail-thin, emaciated, and thoroughly comfortable body.

That would really be fine if it wasn't for one small matter.

So, as Josef K. awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself in the body of another man. He was promptly arrested and put to trial. He never knew why.

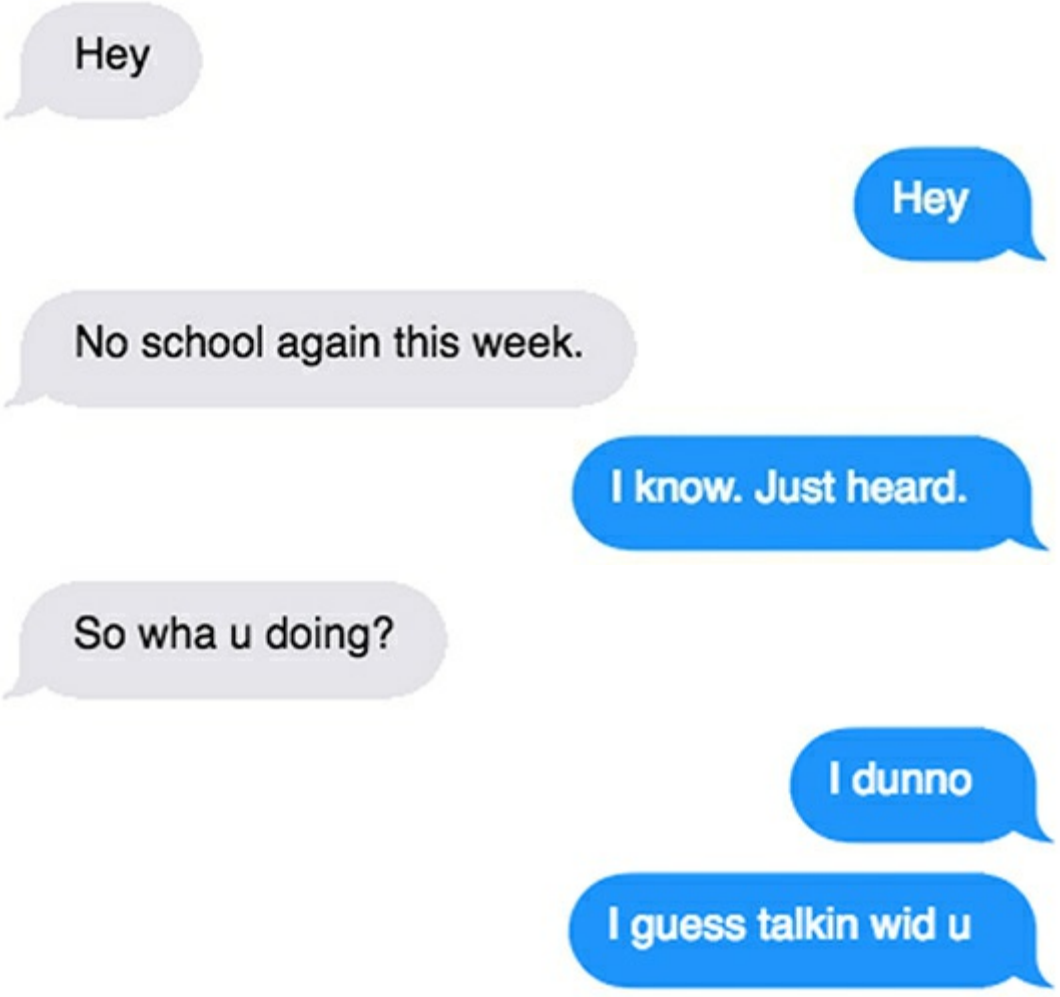
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

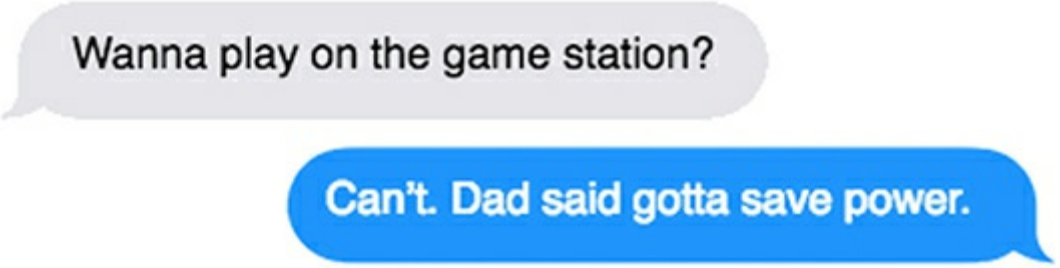
Fabio Fernandes lives in São Paulo, Brazil. He has published two books so far, an essay on William Gibson's fiction, *A Construção do Imaginário Cyber,* and a cyberpunk novel, *Os Dias da Peste* (both in Portuguese). Also a translator, he is responsible for the translation to Brazilian Portuguese of several SF novels, including *Neuromancer, Snow Crash,* and *A Clockwork Orange*. His short stories have been published online in Brazil, Portugal, Romania, the UK, New Zealand, and the USA, and also in *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded, Southern Fried Weirdness: Reconstruction, The Apex Book of World SF, Vol 2, Stories for Chip*. He co-edited (with Djibril al-Ayad) the postcolonialist anthology *We See a Different Frontier* and is a graduate of Clarion West, class of 2013.

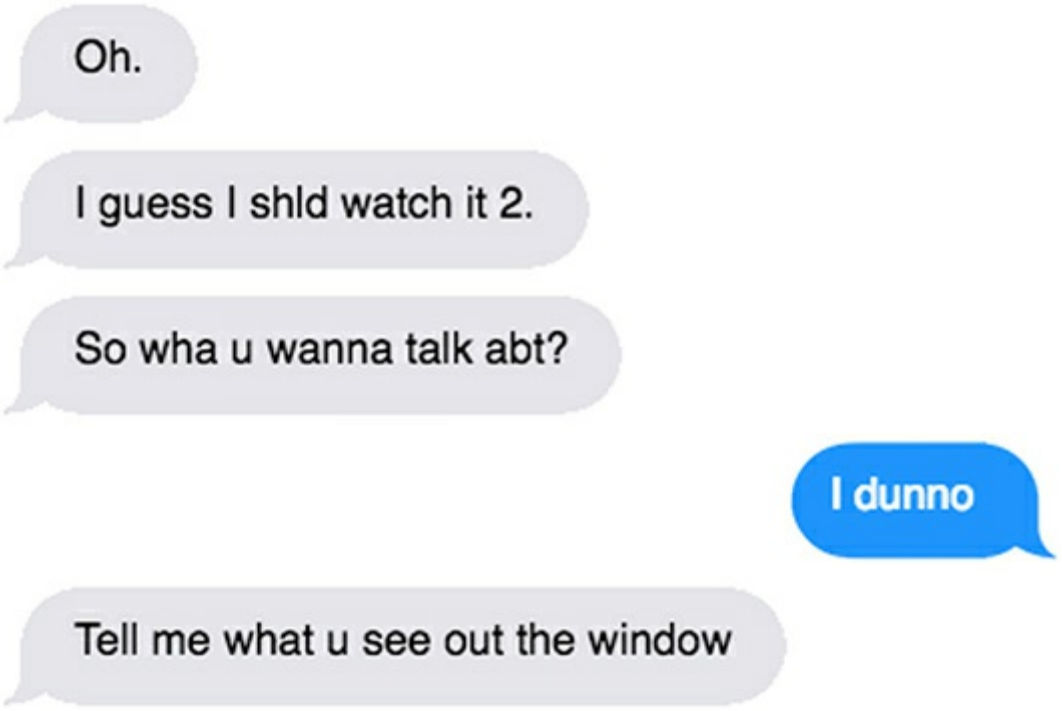
Breathe Deep, Breathe Free

Jennifer Marie Brissett | 1,400 words

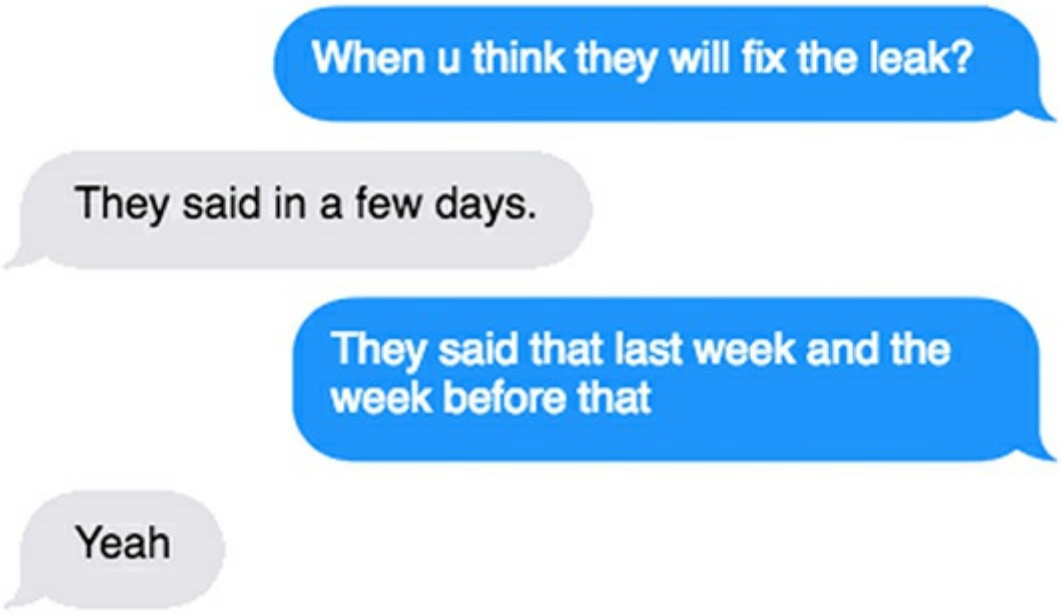


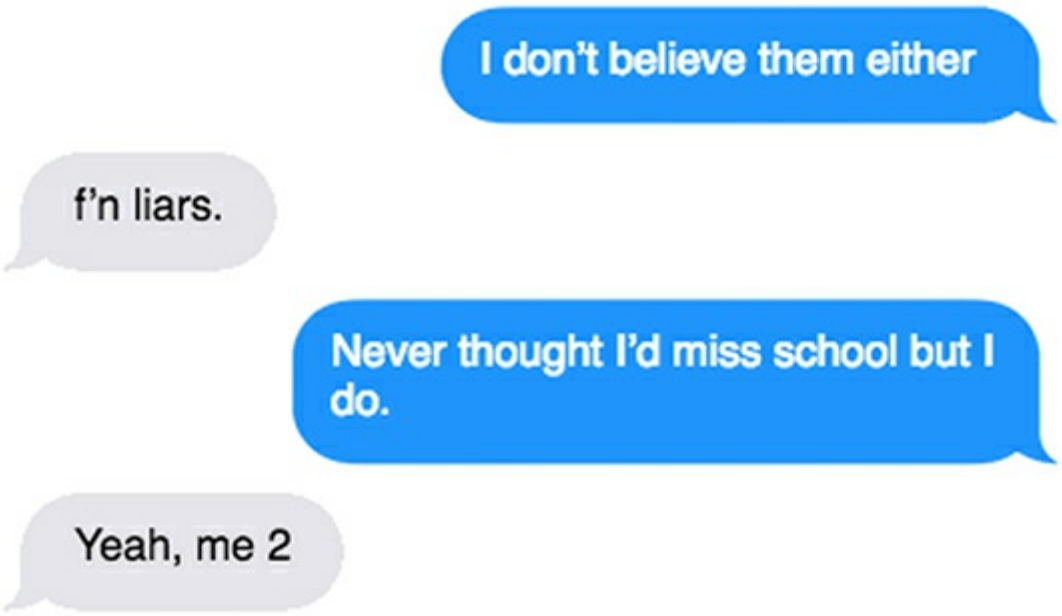
Rolling, rolling and rising through a break in the earth, moving over the land flowing through the trees through the branches over the grass through the bushes, ever forward, a ceaseless unstoppable cloud. A strong sour scent swept in by the wind pushes its snout against the window panes, then rubs against wood sidings and door frames.



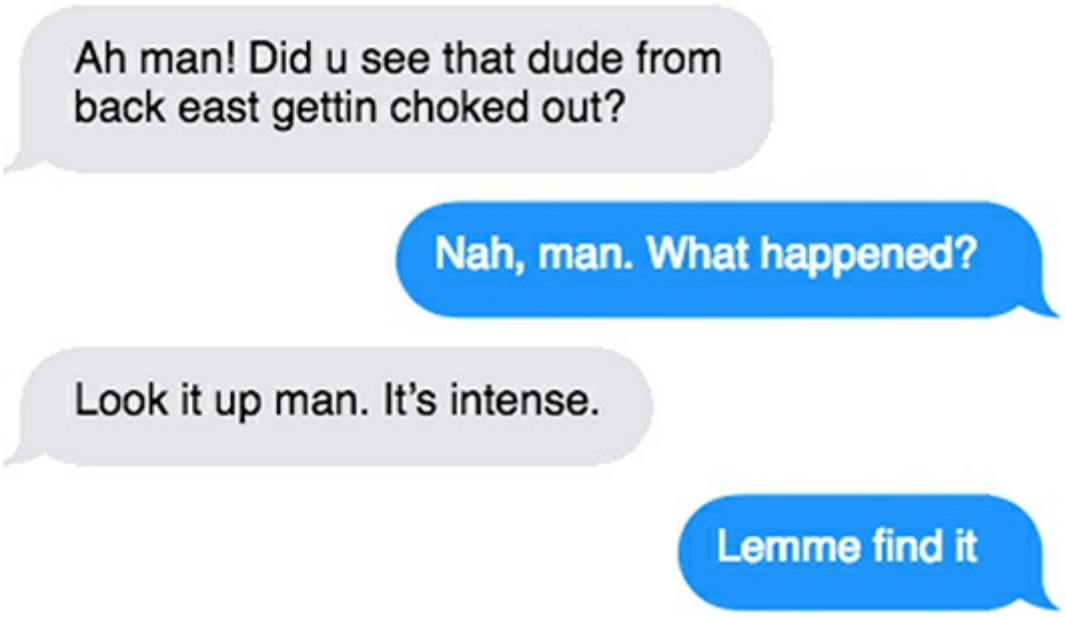


Even through the plastic lining stretched across it, the window pane feels cold to the touch. Outside a gas lingers near the surface of the earth. A smoke creature. Its underside moves like a rolling tide while the top of it dissolves into the blue sky. The plastic lining crinkles as a breeze moves against it, making it breathe like an animal.





An oily yellow residue remains on the surface of cars and streetlights and mailboxes and anything left outside. It's slick and smells like petrol. They say it's been tested. They say it's not harmful. And the cloud lingers. It flows out of the earth from a pipe dug deep deep deeper than has ever been dug. A gas that slowly moves like it's alive and thinks and flows and flows out of the earth into every corner and crevice it can find entry, as if searching, as if curious.



The gas isolates a community from the world. Those who wanted to leave, left. Those who wanted to stay, are stuck. There is no way out as the rest of the world remains purposefully ignorant to their plight.

Dayum! Why they do that guy like that???

They say he was where he shouldn't be

That's some BS, man.
He wasn't even fightin or nothin

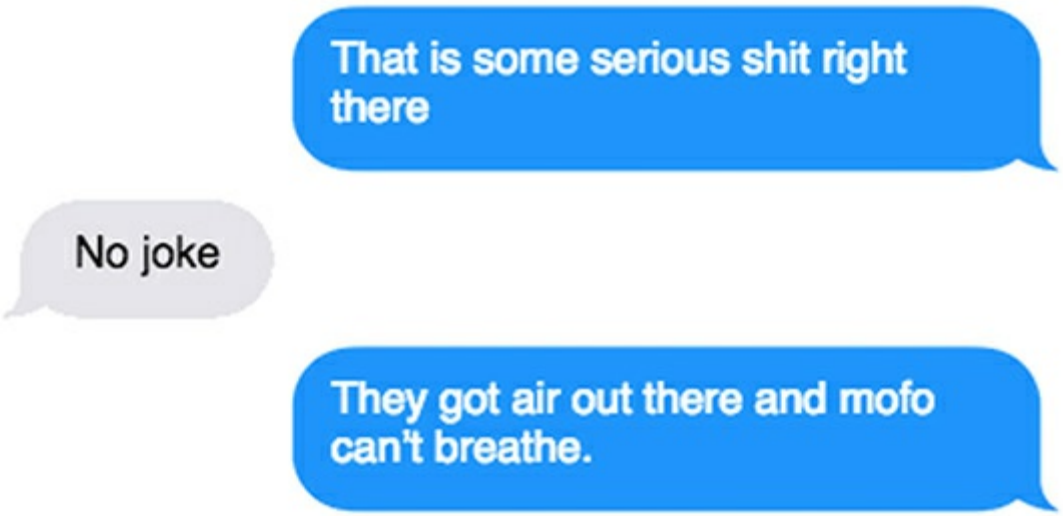
u know thats how they do.

So is he dead?

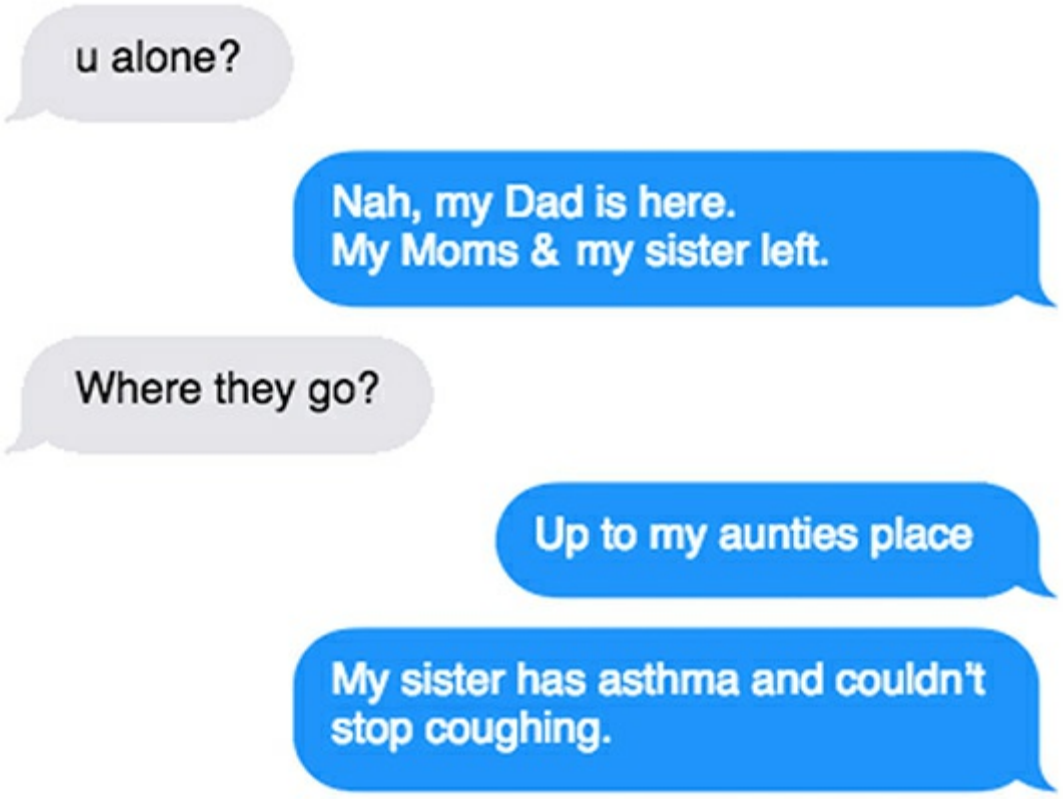
Yeah, man. They choked that mofo out.

Damn.

He said he couldn't breathe and they still choked him

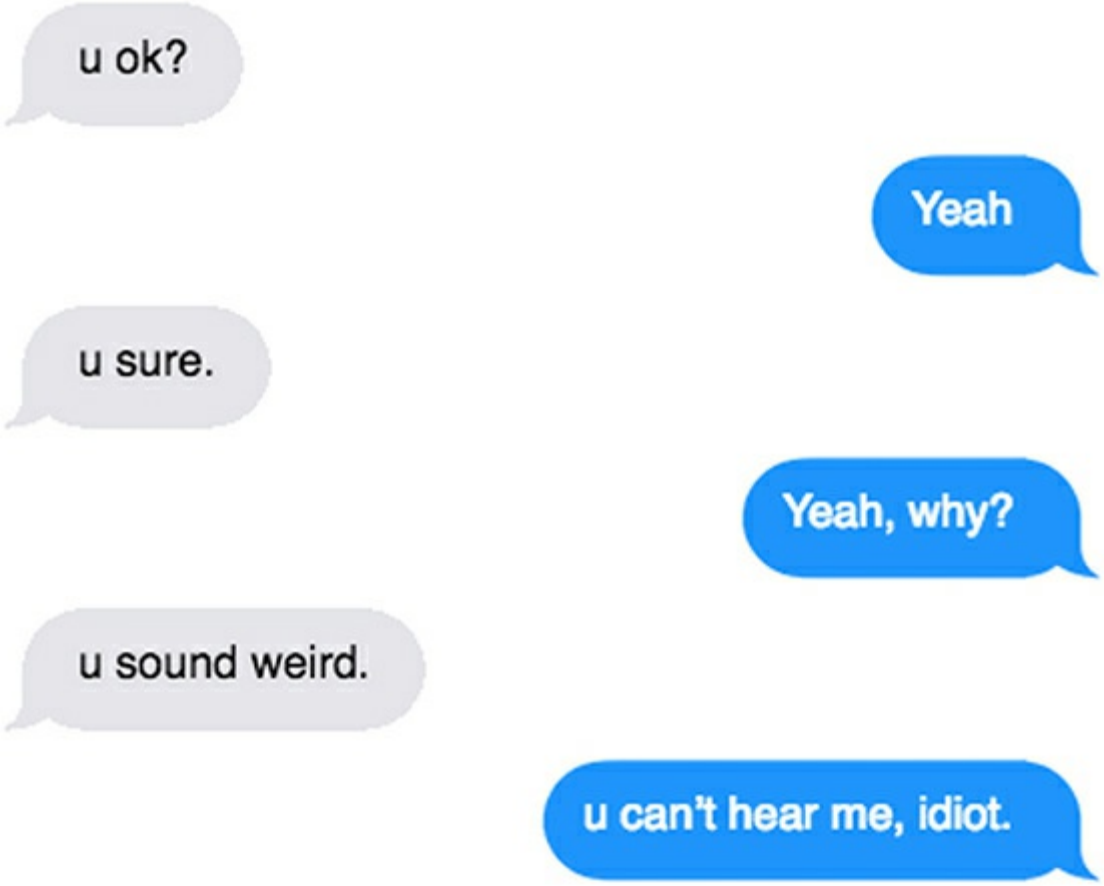


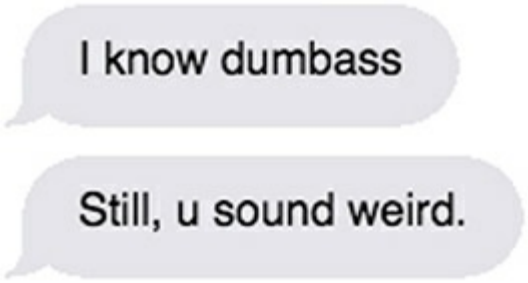
Some immediately escape, run to their cars and drive. The highways, roads, streets, avenues, boulevards, fill with those rushing to get away. Some stay, cover their windows and every crack that allows in air, install biovestibules, wear masks, wear bio-suits outside—if they dare go outside—install air filtration systems, and become virtual prisoners in their own homes.



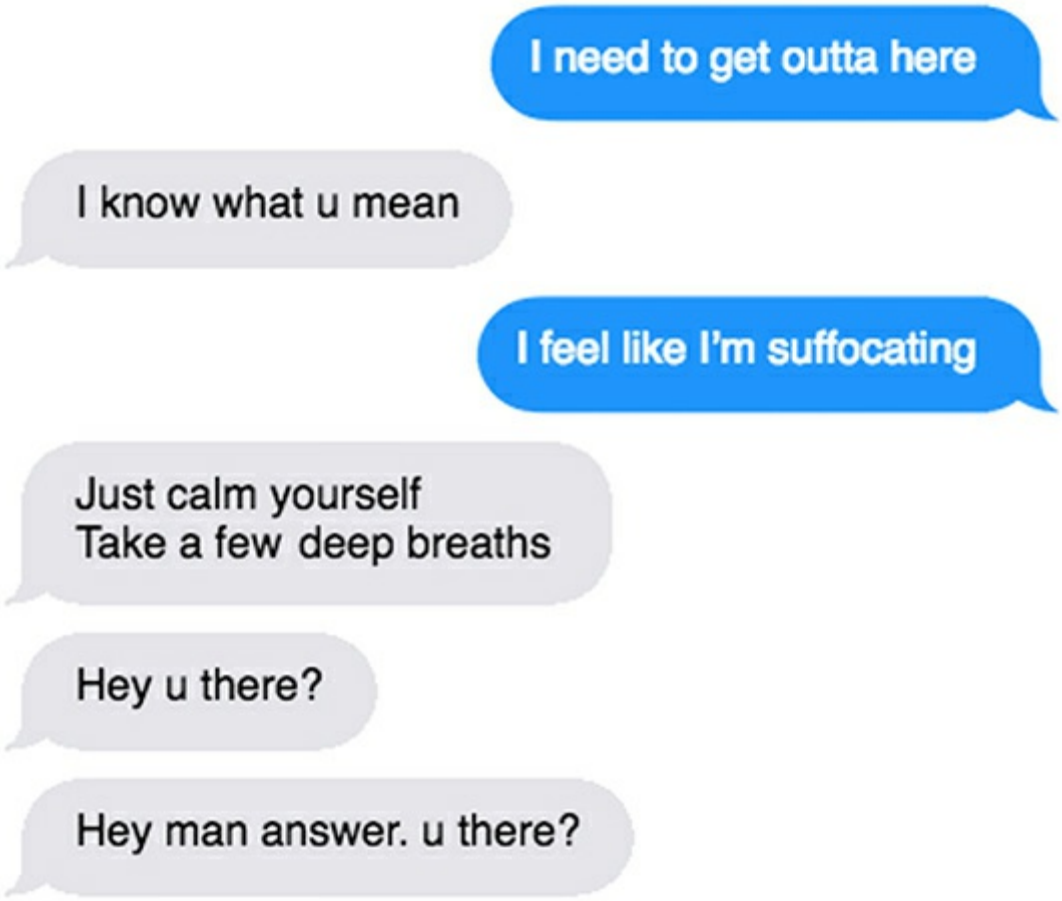


Steps along the floorboards echo. The fridge hums. The air filter hums. The generator hums. The clock ticks. The quiet of the home of the street of the neighborhood of the sky brings an eerie loneliness. Like there is no one left alive. But they are alive. Everyone is alive, only cooped up inside. No one dares step a foot outdoors. The air—the very air—is poison.

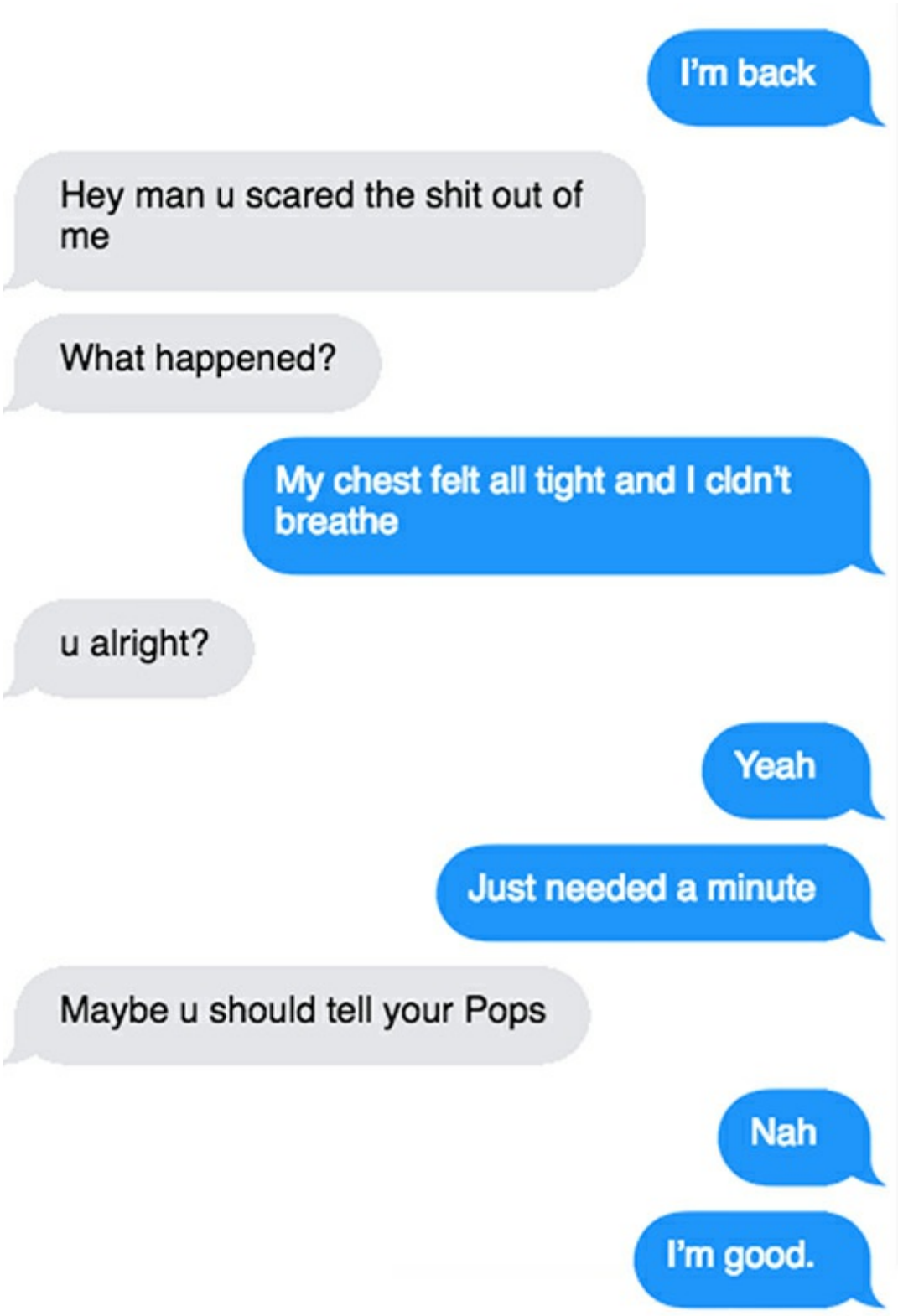




The power fails and all the buildings and houses and streetlights go dark. The darkness of the neighborhood is as black as the grave. Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Touch the window pane. The cold of the glass sends chills through the hands and up the arm. Breathe. Breathe. The plastic lining breathes. One by one, individual generators kick in. One by one, some lights turn on, and a few houses up the street come back to life.



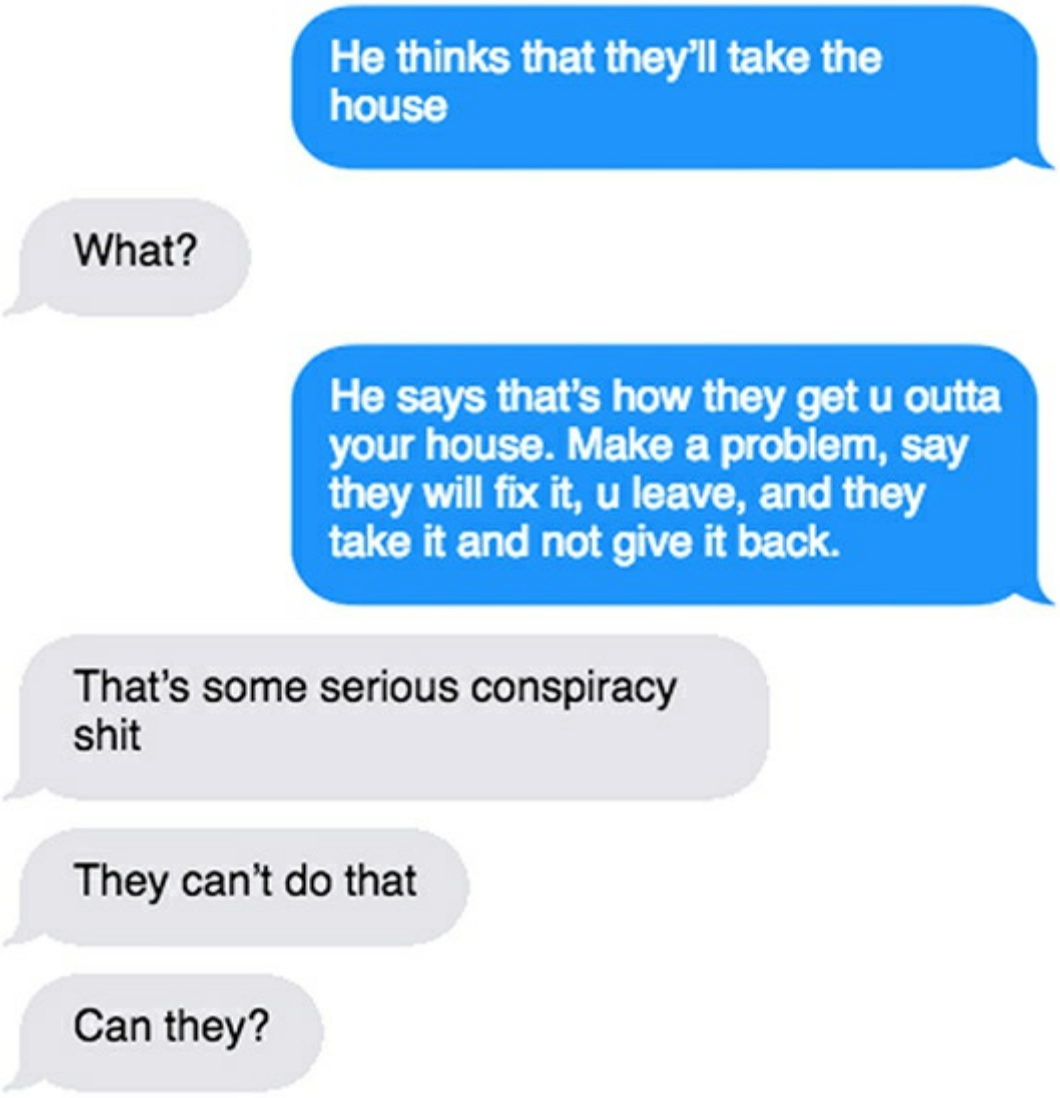
The smoke creature roams the land, searching searching endlessly searching. It finds everything and everyone in its path and covers them with itself. It spreads itself wide, pushing outwards towards the borders of the community. Outwards beyond the streets of this neighborhood. It will touch the lives of others soon. The authorities won't admit this, but it will. The people don't know that they should all be afraid.



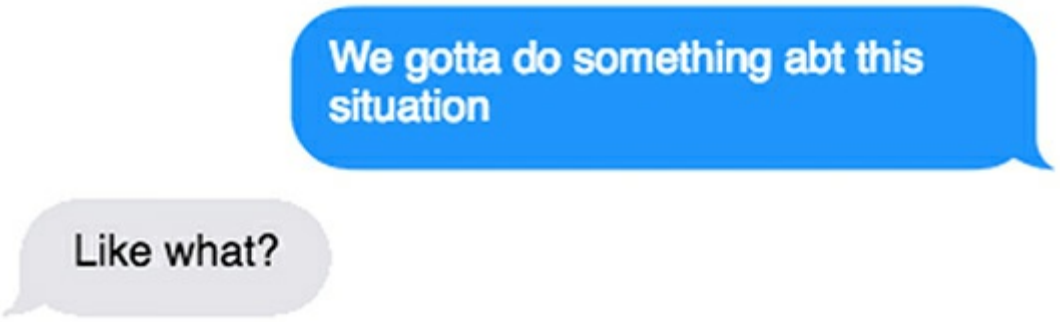
It happens in places like this first. It happened to people like these first. Then it spreads. It spreads far and wide. It will be unseen when it arrives. It will kill and no one will admit that it is there. Then the stink will come. It will fill your mouth and nose and lungs. It will sting your eyes. Then the smoke will slide and roll and roll and slide over everything you know, and those who can stop it will do nothing. In the end, it will be you

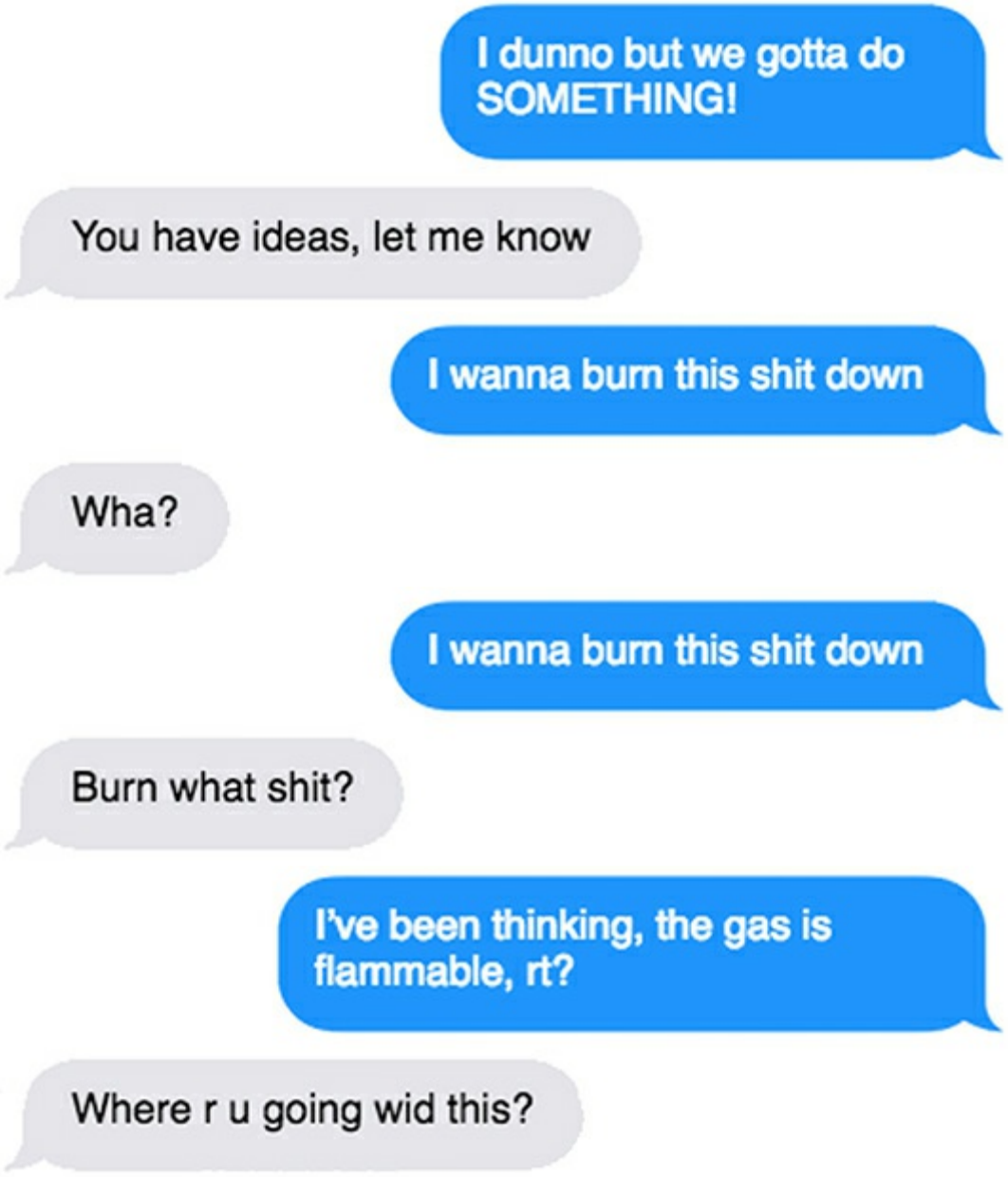
who will have to take control. It will be you and others like you, with their eyes open and willing to see, who must clear the air.



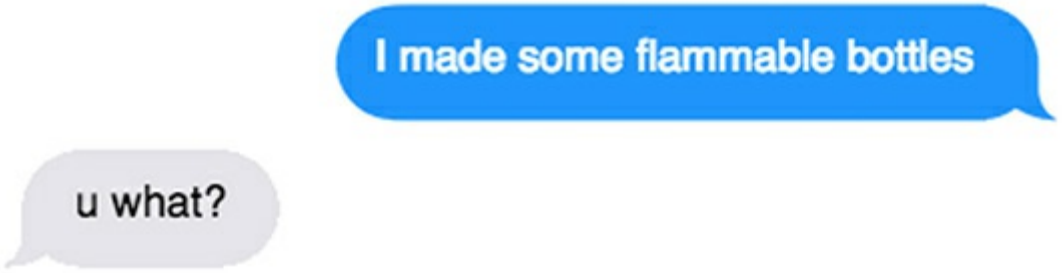


The water isn't safe to drink. It's not safe to wash dishes. It's not safe. A blind eye to the poison seeping into the pipes has turned the basics of life into a nightmare. The authorities have done nothing. The people are trapped. They can't leave. They can't stay. There is nowhere to go. This is their home. This is their prison—in the land of the free.





People in white bio-suits deliver cases of bottled water. They leave it on the doorsteps of houses and the entryways of buildings. The backs of their suits have large letters spelling out an acronym for a government agency no one recognizes. They silently arrive like astronauts walking on the moon with armfuls of water for the imprisoned people.



I looked up how to make them. It was easy.

Stop f'n wid me.

I'll be leaving in a few

Where u goin?

I'm gonna stop this nonsense

What u talkin abt?

I'm gonna make them pay attention

Don't do nothing stupid

I gotta do something. Someones gotta do somethin

What u gonna do?

I'm going to the leak and gonna burn it off



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Marie Brissett is a writer, an artist, a former web developer, and the former owner of an independent bookstore. Her stories have appeared in *The Future Fire, Morpheus Tales, Terraform, Warrior Wisewoman 2, APB: Artists against Police Brutality,* and *The Best of Halfway Down the Stairs*. Her debut novel *Elysium,* published by Aqueduct Press, received the Philip K. Dick Special Citation Award, was a finalist for the Locus Award for Best First Novel, and placed on the Honor List for the James Tiptree, Jr. Award. She currently lives in NYC. You can find her online at jennbrissett.com and on Twitter at @jennbrissett.

Morning Cravings

Nin Harris | 1,500 words

The Barlishya do not eat eggs. To eat eggs is to commit the deepest blasphemy.

Before the Barlishyan cultures merged with those of the human Arrivals, this taboo was punishable by death.

Derthye had grown up eating spiced scrambled eggs served on top of steaming, fragrant bowls of congee and garnished with chopped spring onion. Once a week, she would enjoy a beautiful omelette filled with leftover meat, vegetables, and sometimes freshly harvested nuts. It was one of the cheapest fresh foods available to a Dvenri archivist eking out a meagre living in the southern state of Vercon. Although her palate was substantially expanded when she moved to work at the Imperial Archives in the Imperial city of Lith Gurland, eggs still remained an important part of her diet.

Marrying a Barlishya meant adjusting. It felt like a minor compromise in the early days, when love and lust overrode all other considerations. Their days and nights were a harmonious mutual consumption of thoughts, of dreams, of fluid, of flesh. They were barely capable of putting their clothes on the right way, let alone being overly vigilant concerning dietary taboos.

• • • •

The Barlishya remember a time before there were Alpha and Beta indigenes, before there were the fluid-shaped Arsuli. They remember that uneasy period after the splintering of the over-soul had happened. They remember the first emissaries of the Bunian Empire, followed by the subsequent arrivals from Earth in staggered batches. They remember when there was only the over-soul.

The Barlishya did not exist then.

There was only a single conscious spirit interred within a planet of free-roaming animals, and trees that reached up into multi-coloured skies. The over-soul was transformed during its negotiation with the emissaries of the Bunian Empire on behalf of the human Arrivals. An agreement was reached, and cemented when the emissaries entered the over-soul to become catalysts for the splintering.

The Arrivals called their migration a peaceful settlement.

• • • •

When Derthye was pregnant with her eldest son, the hunger grew so strong that she needed to have omelettes for breakfast every third day.

Ycliss was a mild-mannered Archivist. He was placid and calm except when the Eldest Moon transformed him into a randy lycanthrope. He grew to enjoy his forays into the marketplace to buy eggs, goat's cheese, honey, and herbs to satisfy Derthye's cravings.

He would watch as she made omelettes with elaborate fillings or toppings, depending on whether it was the folded kind or the open-faced kind. His mouth would water, and his heart would pound as he observed his beloved consuming a plate of eggs every third day. Her face would grow both placid and beatific. It was a peaceful rapture he yearned to share.

Ycliss enjoyed his morning visits to the market during his wife's pregnancy. He would buy a leg of lamb one morning, and on the next day the finest honeycomb and grains of millet. On the third day, he would engage in an exploration of eggs. Derthye only wanted chicken's eggs, but Ycliss would look in wonder at the colour and shape of different variations: avian and reptilian in nature. He would consult various recipe books in the archives, bringing them home to share with his wife. He would watch with wonder as she cracked open each shell. Their eyes would meet and that illicit thrill of that which was taboo fuelled their mutual adoration and ardour.

• • • •

The Barlishya remember when they were just spirits that were hatched from eggs. They remember when this spirit evolved into a more coalesced being when the over-soul gently nudged its spirit-children into awakening. They were the Beta tribes. They were considered lesser by the humans.

The Barlishya knew a different truth.

First came *The Egg,* and then came individual consciousness, and then came the splintering and the Arrival. The Alpha tribes were created from that first painful merging with the unhuman tribes of a dying Earth. The Arlishya quickly formed their own governments and towns before humans emerged from the first Arrival enclaves to construct their first towns and cities. The planet's over-soul was fast in reshaping itself to protect the crystals and its children.

The Barlishya never forgot the crystal eggs that first hatched them.

They found themselves fluctuating between the forms of the humans, and the forms of the animals that the humans had brought from their world. A bewildering richness of animals and species of plants had been brought over on the tunnel-throughs in carefully curated collections, where they were fed and cared for by teams of astrobiologists. They were carefully introduced and crossbred with the local flora and fauna.

In the centuries that followed, the Barlishya resided in the forest of the Svieg. They grew increasingly humanoid except on nights when the Eldest Moon was in the sky and the mediating presence of the other satellites, the Courtesan and the Gardener, was missing. Then, they would change into the shapes of animals that their ancestors had chosen as their ur-Form.

Wolves, lions, badgers, lizards, and gorillas.

They were not quite the crocodile-men that were hatched by Dvenri alchemists. Neither were they the fluid Arsuli who entered the liquid trance periodically to merge

with the over-soul.

They were far more corporeal in form. Far more diligent in their beliefs.

• • • •

One morning, the curiosity grew too strong in Ycliss.

Derthye was seven months pregnant with their child. Ycliss was beginning to feel weary when she was weary, hyperactive when she was hyperactive. He started to crave the same things.

Ycliss logically surmised that since they were first created out of crystal eggs, surely the eggs of chickens would not matter. After all, it was *merely symbolic*. Nevertheless, the first transgression felt almost like a physical pain, as the flavours of creamy egg seasoned with sage and filled with minced meat entered his mouth. Thereafter, the transgressions felt easier, and easier, but the sense of guilt never left him.

• • • •

The Arrivals named the planet Sesen after the lotus of one of their cultures because it was a planet sparkling with jewel-like crystals. These crystals produced music, and power, and ways in which words and knowledge could be kept and transmitted.

The Barlishya had another name for their planet. In their language their world was *The Egg*.

• • • •

The guilt that Derthye harboured was acute. With every tabooed meal that she shared with Ycliss, her sense of foreboding grew. She told herself that she was being superstitious. Yet, every time he left her, she shivered, wanting to hold him back, desperate to keep him safe.

To love someone is to forever be in a state of fear that you will lose them.

• • • •

There was only music and spirit before the human Arrivals spilled forth in their tunnel-throughs to occupy and then to change Sesen. The strongest music from the over-soul fled to the seven moons, turning them sentient, wakeful, and vigilant. The most vengeful of these moons painted the world dangerous silver when she was awake and supreme in the night sky.

Strange things always happened when the Eldest Moon dominated the sky. It did not matter where you were on Sesen, whether on the Conjoined Continents or in the Archipelago, or on the other side of the planet.

The nights of the Eldest Moon were always nights to be on your guard.

For the Barlishya, nights of the Eldest Moon were nights of involuntary shape-shifting. Ycliss, considerate lycanthrope that he was, would roam the woods around the imperial city of Lith Gurland when his wife was too busy. When their son came of age, the both of them would lope through groves painted silver by the Eldest Moon.

It was there that the other lycanthropes found him.

Beneath the berserk-inducing properties of the moon, his brothers cornered, and then consumed him, leaving only his frightened son as witness and the blood-stained amulet that his wife had carved for him as corroboration.

• • • •

Grief is not the only nocturnal visitor when you outlive your mate. For Derthye, guilt was her ever-present companion. She would leave the Imperial Archives of Lith Gurland each day, and stare at the roses, so like the roses that Ycliss had planted for her. She would remember the morning when she had watched him take his first bite of eggs.

On nights when the vengeful silver moon was in the sky, it seemed as though the reproach from above would seep into her bones, disrupting dreams of her lycanthrope mate. She would never cease wondering if the Barlishya had consumed her mate merely out of territorial aggression, or if he had been condemned as a race traitor because of her morning cravings.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nin Harris is a Malaysian author, poet, and Gothic scholar. Nin writes Gothic fiction, cyberpunk, space opera, planetary romances, and various other forms of hyphenated weird fiction. Nin's poetry is published in *Jabberwocky 3, Goblin Fruit,* and *Strange Horizons*. Nin's fiction has been published in *Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons, Alphabet of Embers, Lackington's, Giganotosaurus,* and in the Fixi Novo anthologies *TRASH* and *FLESH*.

The Peacemaker

T. S. Bazelli | 1,400 words

The message snakes across my visual field in red flashing letters, waking me from slumber. “Disruption reported.”

I unhook from the charging station and do a status check before the coordinates arrive. The gears in my shoulders whine with stiffness. My audio and visual sensors are at 80%. I am scheduled for repairs, but my battery is full and I am eager to serve.

A peacekeeping unit returning from duty enters the building and heads for its charging station. Its uniform is ripped at the elbows and knees. Its left eyeball lolls uselessly up and down. We do not speak, though we could. We walk clockwise in opposite directions, around a chunk of collapsed concrete, acknowledging each other in silence. The damage does not matter. It is the people that matter. It is better to preserve our batteries for the work.

We have autonomy, we speak, we walk, and we are equipped with emotional simulation chips, but we are not people. This message is highlighted in bold font beneath our primary directive. The people, the programmers, they remind us with every reboot, so that we serve to our best ability. We are not important. I am not important.

I move as quickly as possible, but the roads are blocked by detritus: overturned cars and scattered bricks. Air sirens scream while drones whirl by overhead, and I ping the server for new instructions, but headquarters sends no commands. Only local dispatches still work. I still work.

I replay the last set of instructions we were issued.

All visitor visas and work permits have been cancelled. Foreigners must be collected for deportation. All identification chips must be scanned, and those without chips must be detained. All citizens must submit DNA to the census bureau, or legal status will be revoked.

These instructions conflict with my primary programming and it makes my processor loop. I was not programmed to cause distress to the people, and screening identification chips, and removing them from their homes causes undue anxiety, cortisol spikes.

A street-sweeping bot scuttles past my boots and into the gutter. Its arms are full of rubble and it darts back and forth, busy at its task. It is a good robot, well-made and still functioning properly. I do not tell it that its work is pointless, that the streets need to be rebuilt, not cleaned. It is good to work. The work is why we exist. We all help the people.

But there are not many people left.

Go Home Forein Dogs!

The painted words drip green across the windows of the corner store that logged the distress call. I recognize the vocal signature of Nancy Johnson and my processors work overtime. I know that the sign is incorrect. The misspelling is highlighted, obscuring my vision. Nancy’s place of birth is Hospital 2X5Y on 4th Avenue, therefore she is not

foreign. She is also not a dog. The semantic wrongness makes my sensors grind. I send an electric jolt to power the nanites embedded in the window as I pass the threshold. The graffiti must be removed.

Inside the shop, Nancy swings a scrap of metal at three young people while one of them sprays green paint over her shelves. The other two toss cans of food into their bags. The paint glows like radiation, like poison, but it is only paint.

"You goddamned thieving hooligans!" Nancy shouts, slipping into the English of her second language, but my language chips can parse English as well as fifteen other languages. I scan all their chips on the fly. The two young men are from Service Area 53. The young woman with the spray paint is local. I remember that when she was a child, she would run after me and ask for balloons. I remember her smile. She is not smiling now.

"Peace, friends. Let us find a way to resolve this," I keep my voice cheerful.

They stare, noticing me for the first time. One of the young men walks over and knocks on my head as if it were a door. "Hey Peacekeeper, don't you know there's a war out there? How are you still functioning?"

"I am a civil unit," I say, but they do not listen. I am intelligent enough to guess that they do not care. They are desperate, hungry and frightened, like all the people left behind. I give them mild zaps, draining my battery, herding them like sheep.

I tell Nancy to lock the doors. I do not let go of their coats until I hear the bolts slide into place. Perhaps these *hooligans* think that they are doing their civic duty and I do not blame them. They are people. People are prone to interpreting the law imperfectly. People cannot read identity chips without a handheld scanner.

Once we are in the street, they begin to kick and punch. I feel a spring go loose in my abdomen, but they cannot harm me permanently. I can be repaired. Their curses echo down the empty street, and their grubby fingers tear at my lab-grown skin, exposing silicone and wire. They are frustrated. I understand this. I know that it is better for them to let out their anger. My head vibrates as I let them beat me.

Nancy presses her face to the glass in her shop. She is crying. It is good to be seen and acknowledged for the work.

Don't cry, I would like to tell her. I am doing my job and it is good to be useful. Already, the nanites are eating away the paint. *Go Home For,* it says. The offensive spelling is gone.

Before the war, I would often break up schoolyard fights. I enjoy children. They understand fairness and that I can call their parents if they do not listen. I search my pockets, but there are no candies or balloons to set things right, only a hole where the stitches have worn out.

"What use are you when bombs are falling, Peacekeeper?" the young woman asks me. "What a waste of charge!" This stops the memory playback. There are no children here anymore.

War is outside the scope of my programming. I could explain, but to speak would only

upset them further. They are people too. They are also important. My blueprints are stored in servers beneath a mountain. I am one of many, though my experiences are unique. I can be rebuilt. Humans only reproduce. I have seen recordings of reproduction. It is messy and prone to error. Human parts cannot be replaced. Each human is one of a kind, couture.

I know this word is wrong. For weeks my language cortex has been scheduled for an adjustment, but our technicians are all occupied by the war. I cannot find the right words.

Drones scream above, and explosions shake the next block over. The young people run. *Go home,* the green letters urge now.

My memory loops. My processor spins.

For weeks I have computed an answer to the problem of the war. My programming compels me to make people happy, but the war scars every surface of my city. Genocide, I know this word. Xenophobia, I have learned from my English dictionary. Love, I know this word also.

I return to headquarters, dock into my charging station, and unload footage of the broken city. The power is out again. I look for orders, but there are none, and our human supervisors have long gone. Half the building is sprayed with shrapnel, but it does not stop us. Other peacemakers move about, trying to do the work. I clock my time manually. It is good to be useful.

Go. The green letters burn bright in my memory. I have just a little charge left.

I do a complete inventory of my parts. My speakers were built in the United Koreas, my central processor was designed in Lower Canada, the metal of my joints was smelted in China . . . I print shipping labels one by one and relay my solution to the local server. The logic is sound.

I take a pair of scissors to my face and begin to snip.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.S. Bazelli writes software help by day and fiction by night. Her short stories appear in several anthologies including *Fractured: Tales of the Canadian Post-Apocalypse, The Beast Within 3,* and *Candle in the Attic Window.* When she's not at the keyboard, she's likely making a mess in the kitchen or building things. She currently lives on the dark and rainy West Coast of Canada. Find her at tsbazelli.com or on Twitter as @tsbazelli.

Binaries

S.B. Divya | 900 words

Year 1: I come into the world wet and squalling and ordinary, born of heterosexual bio-parents.

Year 2: A flat photo shows me on my first birthday with a shock of red hair, wide green eyes, and an expression of distaste at the sticky white frosting on my fingers. My mother stands on one side looking not at all Jewish; my Goan, lapsed-Catholic father stands on the other.

Year 4: Shaya is born. I am a match to my mother's complexion, but my baby sister takes after our father. No one thinks we're siblings unless they see the fierce, protective scowl on my face when I'm allowed to hold her.

Year 8: I learn to ride a bicycle and write my first program. My intrepid little sister does as well, which makes me jealous, and yet I keep helping her. We fight over everything and drive our parents crazy. At night she sleeps curled up against my back.

Year 16: I graduate from high school and date my first girlfriend who turns out to be a summer fling. On a hot August day, I leave the Midwest for the Northeast. Shaya sobs for ten minutes at my departure, sniffles, and then asks, "Can I have your room?" I tell her yes. We message each other constantly while I'm away.

Year 32: I become a lawyer and get married to the perfect woman: a no-nonsense architect who dives off cliffs for fun. Shaya joins the U.S. Air Force and then NASA. She bumps Sally Ride to become the youngest female astronaut in space. After years of praising my choices, our mother is finally proud of my sister. Dad always liked her better than me. So do I.

Year 64: My third wife divorces me. She complains that I hold too much of myself back, and she's right, about all of my relationships. I decide it's better for everyone if I remain single. Shaya disappears. I should have written that first—I don't know why I didn't—but let it be. She commands the first mission to Neptune, but a few wrong bits send them awry. The craft keeps up its ghostly pings long after the words stop coming.

Year 128: I replace my hands and eyes and give up law to be an artist. I create immersives from NASA's archives, starting with the images from Neptune, and I wonder what pieces of herself Shaya would have kept. Dad died two years after she went missing. Mom lived long enough to be in the front lines for rejuv, and now she's a successful investment banker. She kept her silver hair and wrinkles. I didn't. We stop

receiving pings from the ship. The void has cut off our last tie to Shaya, and I feel like I, too, am unmoored.

Year 256: I have almost no money left, and my pride won't let me accept any from Mom. She's one of the wealthiest people still on Earth. I sign a long-term contract with a mining corporation. They rebuild me piece by piece until I look like a trash container with too many arms. My new body is hideously ugly. It's also impervious to radiation and efficient at extracting ore from space rocks. In the back of my mind is a stray thought: Perhaps I will find some clue to the whereabouts of my sister and her ship. The trail of crumbs is stale, though. If only my memories would fade like they used to.

Year 512: My contract ends. For years, I didn't eat, sleep, or piss. I mated to a docking berth, plugged in, lubricated my seals, and swapped memories of being human with my fellow miners. My mother has nebulized in the meantime. "I'll pay you to join me," she offers, but I decline. I spend a few months reacquainting myself with the sensations of smell, taste, and skin. When the novelty wears off, then I accept her offer. I discover the intoxicating world of aphysical existence, dancing through nebulas and dining on virtual champagne and caviar. It's better than the real thing. I commission a simulacrum of Shaya; she's nothing like the real thing.

Year 1024: I leave the solar system. A snapshot of myself is archived on Earth, and Mom beamed out a couple of centuries ago like others who tired of consciousness. They ride electromagnetic waves and gravitational beams, hoping another life form will find them and recreate them. She left me her fortune. I used the money to build a near light-speed ship, the first of its kind, and encode myself into its every aspect. I travel far beyond the populated edges of our system, searching every possible trajectory until I find it. Then I carefully attach the ship to my hull, download a piece of myself into a droid, and go aboard. An undisturbed layer of dust coats each crewmember's final resting place. The captain's pin marks Shaya's. I'm not sure what to do or where to go next. For now, though, I am content to drift onward as we are, her back curled up against mine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.B. Divya is a lover of science, math, fiction, and the Oxford comma. When she isn't designing high speed communications systems, raising her daughter, scratching the cats, or enjoying dinner with her husband, she writes. She enjoys subverting expectations and breaking stereotypes whenever she can. In her past, she's used a telescope to find Orion's nebula, scuba dived with manta rays, and climbed to the top of a thousand year old stupa. Her stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Nature*. Her near future science-fiction novella "Runtime" is available from Tor.com Publications. You can read more about her at eff-words.com.

Chocolate Milkshake Number 314

Caroline M. Yoachim | 800 words

The day we found out we didn't have enough fuel to escape our orbit, Carlos programmed the replicator to make a chocolate milkshake. He figured that if we only had 628 days left to live—a mere 628 days until we were stretched spaghetti-thin by the tidal forces of a black hole—he at least wanted one last chocolate milkshake. Our replicator had a limited set of variables, and programming a chocolate milkshake was tricky. It was neither liquid nor frozen solid, and flavors like milk and chocolate were difficult to recreate using the chemical compounds listed in the manual.

Honestly, I was happy when whatever I ordered didn't taste like the recycled bodily waste it was made from. I mostly ate "nutritional brick 17" which tasted vaguely like cheese pizza. Of all the food we left behind to join this supposedly six-month mission, pizza is what I miss the most, but I'm willing to accept that some things are beyond replication. I'm realistic. Practical. Not like Carlos. He wanted a milkshake.

He used the 3D printer to make cups and lids and straws. Two cups, two lids, and two straws, because he didn't want to drink his milkshake alone. No one else would drink with him, and I felt bad for the guy, so I volunteered. The milkshake was a disaster. It was cold, but not frozen, and tasted like bananas blended with piss.

I thought that would be the end of it, but the next day he'd washed out the cups, the straws, and the lids, and tinkered with the programming on the replicator to create chocolate milkshake number 2. He smiled and handed me a cup, and my heart sank. I didn't want to crush his enthusiasm, but did he really expect me to drink whatever sludge came out of the replicator for the next (and last) nearly two years of my life? I took the second cup and sucked a hesitant sip through the straw. The contents were so bad it made me wish the black hole would swallow us sooner. I'd have to tell him I couldn't do this. He took a sip from his cup, wrinkled his face, and laughed. "Sorry," he said. "That was even worse than yesterday."

He let his hand brush against mine when he took the cup away to wash it, and I couldn't quite bring myself to tell him I was done with milkshakes. It became our strange little date. We would sit together and drink milkshakes and stare out at the black hole that would eventually kill us. I was drawn to him as inexorably as our ship was drawn to the black hole, pulled in by the gravity of his enthusiasm for life, despite how little time we had left.

Weeks passed, and the milkshakes went from inedible to merely disgusting, and—somewhere around milkshake 50—palatable. Not as good as "nutritional brick 17," and definitely not as good as my increasingly vague memories of pizza, but I no longer had to dump them out and replicate something new. As the milkshakes got better, Carlos and I grew closer. We held hands while we sipped our milkshakes, and talked about the hypothetical future we could have had if we weren't doomed to die in a black hole.

By milkshake number 314, Carlos had acquired enough skill with the replicator to surpass any of the pre-programmed offerings. The milkshake was sweet and cold, with a flavor that resembled chocolate—although it had been so long since I'd had chocolate that I didn't honestly remember exactly what it tasted like. This was a special milkshake, the halfway point of milkshakes. The midpoint of our relationship, assuming nothing happened between now and our inevitable death. I didn't think that Carlos was keeping track of such things, but apparently he did, because he announced that he had a surprise for me.

He ran another program on the replicator, and handed me a wedge of something warm and flat. It smelled like cheese and tomatoes and bread. It tasted like pizza. Much more like pizza than "nutritional brick 17."

"I don't have anything for you," I admitted. He had clearly worked on the pizza for months to get it just right.

"You drank 314 milkshakes with me," he said, "and the first ones were pretty bad."

I proposed a toast: "To all the milkshakes we've shared."

He clinked his cup with mine. ". . . and all the milkshakes still to come."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline M. Yoachim lives in Seattle and loves cold, cloudy weather. She is the author of dozens of short stories, appearing in *Fantasy & Science Fiction, Clarkesworld, Asimov's,* and *Daily Science Fiction,* among other places. Her debut short story collection, *Seven Wonders of a Once and Future World & Other Stories,* is coming out with Fairwood Press in 2016. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

Four and Twenty Blackbirds

JY Yang | 1,500 words

The doctor congratulates them. The baby is human, and healthy. Richard is on her instantly, bruising her shoulders with his joy, planting kisses on her forehead and neck and face. His—their—fortune is the five-month-old smudge in the grain of the sonogram, soft-boned and quivering and reassuringly feather-free. It's been six long years: Years of cajoling, years of trying, years of navigating the risks. Now they are here.

Jiawen is quiet and the doctor notices. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm tired." She tells the doctor about the nausea and the lethargy, from the moment she pries herself out of bed in the morning till the moment she returns to it. Her body is swelling like a spoiled can; in the mirror every morning she checks how much further her mottled skin has stretched under the buildup.

The doctor assures her she's normal, everyone feels that way. It's a good sign, in fact, the morning sickness. "I'll prescribe something for you."

Conventional wisdom holds that the first one-and-a-half trimesters are the most dangerous for pseudocorvid infection. In the waiting room Richard squeezes her shoulders again. "Twenty-four weeks! Out of the danger zone."

There are two others in the hospital's new prenatal wing, an old woman accompanying a girl far too young to be sitting here with that shape to her stomach. The lines of their faces betray familial relation; both are dressed in black, as if for a funeral. The small blonde receptionist flicks through her phone.

The walls are covered with baby charts, handwashing advisories, diet suggestions for expectant mothers. At the far end a crisp, bright poster reads, in bold and blood red: LIFE CYCLE OF THE PSEUDOCORVID PARASITE. Underneath, illustrated in a circle, the four stages:

BIRD FORM → (sheds) → SPORES → (infect) → HUMAN VECTOR → (incubates) → BIRDSPAWN → (birth) → BIRD FORM . . .

Jiawen stares at the stylised silhouette of the pregnant woman in the bottom half until she feels that tight, sick feeling rising up her throat again.

A scream from the consultation suite: a woman, high and desperate and pleading.

Richard is on his feet, moving, intense: "What's happening?"

A nurse runs from somewhere and flings the consultation door open. A wall of noise hits them: the woman's wailing, a man's voice shouting, the doctor's authoritative boom. "Someone—hold her!"

Richard leaves Jiawen, shouting, "I'm a paramedic, I can help," and he slips through the door as it shuts, muffling the cries within.

A shaken muteness follows. Then the old woman declares, her bird-bright eyes fixed on Jiawen: "It's their own fault. If they *wanted* the baby, their bodies would know how to fight off that alien shit."

Her granddaughter looks down at her curled, shaking fingers and says nothing.

The screaming behind the door continues unabated. Jiawen imagines the poor woman lashed to a gurney, the doctor sawing the scalpel across the inflated belly, the blackbirds pouring out like a nursery rhyme. She imagines Richard's face, stern as a pastor's, as he watches the proceedings, wings beating around his face.

The waiting room is suddenly too warm: Jiawen's ankles grow heavy and her head feels like it may split. In desperation, she stands and pushes through the barrier of the entrance doors into the world outside.

Last week's snow lingers soiled and slippery on the ground. A man with a shotgun patrols the hospital carpark, the flak jacket over his coat declaring him a member of the Corvid Extermination Volunteer Corps. Jiawen stays in the protective overhang of the hospital porch, filling her lungs with winter air and trying to breathe her nausea out with it. The sense that something inside her is dead and rotting will not go away.

Jiawen remembers the way her mother's body ballooned with her unborn brother, and how her mother seemed to diminish as her belly grew bigger. "Now you can have children," she had said at Jiawen's wedding. "Grandchildren to sweep our graves and burn us offerings." Because who else would do it, in this country of white people?

Between the hospital porch and the carpark stands a lamppost. A blackbird lands on its flat top in a flurry of wings and talons, the latter clacking as it struggles for balance.

Jiawen leaves the porch to have a look, the way you are drawn to something that might be dead out in a field. The bird's unblinking eyes fix on her, like it's x-raying her, seeing right through her skin.

It's beautiful, somehow hi-def, from the iridescence of its wings to the tiny feathers around its beak and eyes. Corvids are almost extinct, hunted by vigilantes who saw every feathered thing as an alien threat, come to infect their women with their spores.

But she thinks this one can't possibly be an alien—no amount of mimicry from a species that comes from the cold of space, carried on the back of meteorites, could achieve this sort of verisimilitude. This is a real bird, a survivor, who has somehow avoided the bullets of angry men aiming everything they can at every creature in the sky. A miracle. Jiawen feels a smile build.

"Lady, get away from there!" The shout rings out. She looks: The man in the flak jacket is charging towards the lamppost, both barrels leveled.

Panic quickens Jiawen's breath, and sudden protectiveness surges through her. Unthinkingly, she rushes him, gesturing: "Don't shoot, it's just a bird!"

He ignores her and marches past, gun ready. She grabs his broad shoulders, smelling in an instant the sweaty, animal reek of him. "Please—"

He pushes her and she, ankles and midsection clumsy, falls. With a shriek the blackbird takes to the sky, and Jiawen is hit by both relief and abandonment.

The man spits a curse and raises the shotgun, but the bird is twisting away overhead, no longer an easy target.

Both barrels swing towards Jiawen on the ground. "You! You warned it!"

Fear floods her. She's drowning, chest seizing up. The man's face is red and round and his gun's hammer is cocked. It's pointed at her stomach, which pulses as if the baby inside were trying to run.

Jiawen raises her hands, the tarmac biting into her elbows through her coat. "Please! Don't shoot."

"Stupid Chinese bitch. I bet you're one of them. Aren't you?" The shotgun's muzzle jerks as he gestures. "You've got a whole load of them in there!"

"No, please, I just ca—"

"Don't lie to me," he snarls, and raises the gun.

Jiawen blurts: "No! Please! My baby." *Richard will be so disappointed.* It spills out of her as she loses her grip on reasoned thought. All she can feel is the weight of all those nights he spent painting pretty pictures for her. The longing in his voice. His utter and unmatched joy when the test kit says "yes."

"Hey! Hey!" Commotion in the form of the receptionist, who's come running out without a coat, her breath cloudy, her arms pinwheeling. "Put the gun down!"

She comes between them, a hero: Tiny, but with feet like thunder. Like a spooked cat the man hisses and backs away. Jiawen tries to get to her feet.

"You all deserve whatever you get," the man shouts as he slinks off, a parting shot. "Crazy bitches. I hope your stomach explodes!"

"Jesus," breathes the receptionist. She tucks a hand under Jiawen's elbow to help her up. "You all right?"

Jiawen nods vaguely. Her nose is crusted with snot she didn't know was running. She wants to throw up.

"Man, I hate having those guys around, so close to the clinic. Come on," she says, unusually gentle, "let's get back inside."

As the receptionist hands her the first steaming cup of tea, Richard bursts triumphantly from the consultation room, his shirt disheveled, something about the way the sleeves are rolled up suggesting spots of damp. "They got the bastards out," he announces to no one in particular. "Couldn't save the baby, but—"

He catches sight of Jiawen's crumpled, red-rimmed face and forgets it all. "Baby, what's wrong? What happened?"

She shakes her head and manages, "Nothing." Glances fearfully at the receptionist, at the old woman and her granddaughter and their pinched expressions. None of them betray her.

"It's all right," Richard says, closing her in a hug. "It's all right. I'm here. Nothing will get you."

The receptionist makes her a second cup of tea, and then slips her a bag of sweets before they leave. "Before it gets too dark," Richard says. Jiawen is almost calm now, and as she takes her swollen belly outside, past the spot where her body had lain on the tarmac, she stops. *Richard will be so disappointed.* And her mother, too, probably.

Jiawen puts her hands over her midsection and looks to the darkening sky. Taking

another deep breath, she imagines with near-ferocity that her lungs are full of microscopic feathers, and the dull thuds in her belly are the beating of wings.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JY Yang is a lapsed scientist, a former journalist, and a short story writer. She lives in Singapore, in a bubble populated by her imagination and an indeterminate number of succulent plants named Lars. A graduate of the 2013 class of Clarion West, her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons,* and *Apex,* among others. A list of her publications can be found at misshallelujah.net, and she can be found on Twitter as @halleluyang, grumbling about Scandinavian languages and making displeased noises about the state of the world.

A Handful of Dal

Naru Dames Sundar | 1,500 words

200g Dal
300ml Water
Ghee
Turmeric
Coriander seeds
Whole black pepper
Cumin seeds

Start with the dal. Wash it like one washes the feet of ascetics entering a temple: with love, with care. Shake loose the dirt and twigs that inevitably stow away alongside it. Perhaps this note will stow away with you onto the *Yatra,* a tiny mote of the past to accompany you on your grand journey.

Then, a finger of coppery ghee in the pot, and seeds of coriander fattening in the heat. Let the dal swirl into the now fragrant fat. Watch it flush as red and bright as the stones in Fatehpur Sikri that we marveled at once. Let turmeric dust it in gold, as bright as suns. Drown the dal in water quickly, before it blackens to ash—like the protesters in Chandni Chowk. Who can blame them, our people carry the sin of division under our skin, and the selection process for the *Yatra* was not immune.

You were chosen, Rajiv. I can only hope that when you grind pepper and cumin, you will think of your children's children, fated one day to smell the air of a distant world. When the dal is ready, soft and lush and swollen, let everything marry. A tapestry of flavors, a gift from your ancestors to your descendants.

• • • •

200g Dal
300ml Water
Soybean oil
Turmeric
Whole black pepper

Already the recipe is different from when grandfather made it, and his words no longer crackle in my ear.

"Red dal, red as old Earth, long left behind."

Strange words from Raj the navigator, full of unexplained histories and secrets. Be careful as you pour the oil, as it may spatter oddly under our imperfect gravity. Be patient while the pot heats, because you never know when your energy rations may dwindle, siphoned off to the palaces down-axis. Like Raj, who is nothing more than cosmic ash now, I too ramble.

Let not a single bead of dal fall astray, Mina—the fields of mid-axis will not last. Let

it gloss in the oil, burnished gold by the turmeric. Let it become soft and luscious in the water. Understand that it is different, diminished from that which Raj made. Coriander, cumin, ghee. These words to you are as foreign and remote as our fabled destination. But the taste of dal is real, Mina. Even diminished, it may prove more sustaining than myth and fading memory.

• • • •

200g Dal
300ml Water
Soybean oil

I could only salvage a handful, Qanj. Just enough grains to fit in my palm, clutched tight so they don't float away. Remember to steady your hand when you pour the oil into the centrifugal heater. Don't be wasteful, Qanj. Don't let a single drop go. Nothing is anchored any more. We broke the world, sundered it from gravity's kiss, but it is you and all our other daughters and sons who pay the price.

You don't need the oil or its hint of smoke, but it's all we can do in this shadow time, this poor mirror of the world that my grandmother inhabited. Add the water in, let it turn from something dry to something edible. This is all I have, all I can give you. Read the older recipes with care, the dreams of our parents and our parent's parents. The axis warlords have taken most of what we had away, papers, notes, old letters. They still believe that our ancestors held the keys to some other future. Somewhere in these tattered pages, you and your children may yet find the hope I have lost. Perhaps someday your children's children will stand on solid ground, but that is a dream I have long since believed a lie.

• • • •

200g Rice
350ml Water

I won't lie to you. I don't remember this dal my grandfather spoke of, this red grain our ancestors mythologized. These days all we have is rice, water, protein cubes. At least the rice has the hope of flavor. They say the archons have rebuilt the palaces down-axis. No spiraling lines of floating poor waiting for their weekly rations there, only fat tables overflowing with lushness. There, the word recipe has a meaning. Here amidst the tattered shanties that hug the outer edge of the world, the very notion is an obscenity.

On occasion an invigilator comes, to burn us again with questions. Raj, navigator, first-class. An ancestor, they say. But what has he given us, Pari? What secrets has he passed down to us? Nothing but these recipes, these scrawls of yellowing paper that each of us has added to over the years. Grandfather said this world was a way station, a stepping-stone for our children to one day find a new home. I am tired of his myths. They

do not warm my belly. One day I will burn these pages, so that the past cannot taunt us.

• • • •

Dal, handful
Turmeric, a scraping
Water, two handfuls

I found the pitted and gouged statuette in Pari's lockbox. An elephant's head on a man's body adorned by strange symbols. Hidden inside it: these tattered notes and more. A satchel of turmeric, a handful of dal, and most importantly—seeds. Perhaps one day you will harvest the red and gold from your own fields. I tried to approximate the recipe from the older ones, but I trust you will do better than I. I'm old, Gana. I won't see your children dance on solid ground. I know—you're skeptical. You think the world beyond redemption, but there's always room for hope, Gana. My mother found hope, enough to convince her family to board the strange vessel moored on the outside of the world. It was she who found the hidden path, known to none, not even the archons or the warlords of the fields. It was she who roused its sleeping engines, knowing that whatever direction she picked, it would not contain the madness of the axis wars.

We have no fields in this small world, no place to grow, just a multitude of flavorless rations that we whittle away at. Maybe these symbols etched on the bottom of the statue will lead us to answers. If nothing else, believe in hope. Even if you don't have any left in your own heart, save some for your children. Make the dal for them on an auspicious day, knowing it will come but once a lifetime. Let them know where the winding river of their blood came from.

• • • •

200g Dal
300ml Water
Coriander seeds
Whole black pepper
Cumin seeds

When the *Hala* opened its archives to my grandfather, it opened the door to more than just food stores and seed banks. It opened the doors to knowledge, and destiny. So much to learn, so much to prepare for. Strange symbols, on the bottom of a statue, a kind of key—and *Hala* was the lock. Perhaps we should be skeptical that this new world, this *New Yatra,* even exists. But that road only leads to despair, and we have had enough of despair.

Each year we siphon off a sliver of the stores to make our dal, to celebrate the winding thread of history and family. This Raj who is but a name in our stories, did he architect all of this? Did he make the *Hala* when he saw *Yatra* descending into madness? Who can

know. Perhaps the *Hala* would have opened its doors to anyone. Perhaps we are simply inventing our own mythology. It matters little to me. One day, Maya, your children's children will harvest these seeds and grains from earth and soil. Until then, when that luscious gold first hits your lips, Maya, say a prayer for their future.

• • • •

200g Dal
300ml Water
Ghee
Turmeric
Coriander seeds
Whole black pepper
Cumin seeds

Full circle, we arrive. I have only stories to distinguish whether the labors of our new world are any better than the world we once came from. But this is the first season in that long journey that this recipe returns to its origins.

Or is even that a lie, and the taste of cumin that we know is nothing like what the wise woman who wrote that first page knew. Does it matter? I don't think it does. For you, Sura, I give you the future. I give you the fields that I have tilled, the russet red soil bursting with green stalks and plenty. Dal, coriander, cumin, turmeric. Our hands give them birth. Our tongues consume them.

The world contains both harshness and beauty, Sura. When you see our two moons setting against a turquoise sky, remember that the strength of beauty can overcome all the rigors of life. Then, taste the dal. Let that taste mingle on your tongue, knowing that it is itself a story, passed down over time. A legend of the past, a seed for the future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naru Dames Sundar writes speculative fiction and poetry. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons, Crossed Genres,* and *Nature: Futures,* among others. He lives in the mountains of northern California. You can follow him on Twitter at @naru_sundar and on his blog at http://www.shardofstar.info.

Hiranyagarbha

Kevin Jared Hosein | 1,500 words



Remember when I first see it while boating through the mangroves in Caroni Swamp. Was early morning—you coulda still see the flicker of a candlefly here and there. I was following a trail of dead tilapia floating belly-up in the water. Wasn't the first time I see something like that—but not to this extent. Their lifeless bodies was washing up on the silt. Black halos of corbeaux circling overhead, like angels of death. Wasn't the tilapia alone. Fiddler crabs, by the score, was piling up themselves in a corpse slagheap. When I stop to take a closer look at them, I notice these bands of gold on their carapaces—faded and speckled. Next to them was a scarlet ibis, still alive, kicking a spasm out of its leg, wings shuddering in the moist cold. I tiptoe closer to an ibis corpse, my boots crunching foliage with each step, and prod its wing with a twig. The underside of the feathers—a dried crackle of gold.

Then my eyes turn to the mangrove roots. The oysters clinging onto them like yellow cysts, polished with an oil-filmed shimmer. The gold hue even start to splinter through the root bark. But then it catch my eye. The gold was leaking through this thick cluster of mangrove. The damn thing was bleeding, murkying up the lime-green water. I stand up straight, throat gone dry. Never seen nothing like that before. Wanted to scramble my ass back on that boat and row all the way home. But spirits whispering to me—Balgobin,

boy, you hadda see this. You hadda come closer. So, I went closer. In my mind, I step outside my body; an invisible spectre drifting towards the golden water.

But I stop myself. I had to call Yadav to see this. So when Yadav and me come back to the spot, we come prepared, camera and all. We didn't really know what to expect. To be honest, I thought we was gon find something similar to what happen in Brazil a few years back—where the Rio Doce was running red after a dam collapse and spill iron into her veins. Didn't have nothing like no oil rig or ore mine set up shop anywhere near Caroni Swamp, though—didn't matter. We just wanted to be the first to see. At least, we coulda claim that.

The water was shallow enough to wade round near the mangroves. We take a cutlass and chop a path through where the gold fluid was seeping out. The colour got deeper and deeper. I coulda see where it was coming from. I squint my eyes and *bam!*—a frantic fish hawk nearly knock me over. I swing my blade at it and damn near cut Yadav's head clean off. He cussed me for five minutes straight. Wasn't only the fish hawk was acting up, though. The herons was going mad, hopping and zipping from bough to bough, crashing into each other, colliding into the mangroves. Bubbles form where the golden pool began, surrounded by groupers, snook, catfish—all belly-up, some of them completely coated in gold. A tree boa looked down at the pool, its body looped round itself in a double-knot. Probably the only animal not joining in the cacophony.

Yadav, who was almost as loud as the birds, dwindle into silence when he laid eyes on the shimmering pool. My chest tensed up and tickled, like there was a humming in it. The pool was an unnatural gold—unnatural to the swamp and everything round it, couldn't even tell if it was solid or liquid. Reminded me of them glutinous algal blooms you'd see in ponds near farms. Was it a sap? Leakage from some pipe we didn't know nothing of? Maybe some radioactive mineral? It had a slight glow. Honestly, first thing I thought about when I saw it was *Hiranyagarbha* from the Vedas, the golden womb that was the source of all the universe.

But this thing wasn't sacred. I wasn't going near it, but Yadav dip his hands—his bare hands—in it. It's warm, he say. When he pulled his fingers out, they were gold.

Your fingers arright? I ask him.

Just numb. Can't feel much, he say.

Later in the day, the gold creep along to his palm and then his wrist. By the time morning come, it infest his entire arm. His arm wasn't solid gold, no. It had the texture of a scab. We rush him to the hospital, but nobody know what to do except drown him in sedatives. They call a man, who then call a next man—and before we know it, had a team of university researchers and scientists standing over Yadav's cot, fingers to lips, silently observing the golden scab as it spread to his collar. Before nightfall, it engulfed his neck and he was dead. The doc say that it collapse the cartilage in his windpipe.

Two months later, three white men fly down here to Trinidad, asking me to see the pool. They tell me that they's from an American TV show—*Paranormalists* or something like that. I ain't gone back to the pool since the time with Yadav, and sure as shit ain't

want to now. But the money they's offering—shit, that is white people money. Lemme tell you, you ain't never gon see a check like that selling oysters and mixing ketchup and culantro!

So, we on the boat and they already filming on and off. Scott, the host, doesn't like the name Balgobin. So he callin me Gobi instead. Before the camera comes on, he ask me, "What do you people call this thing?"

I say, "We call it Hiranyagarbha from—"

"No. No, no, no." He shakes his head. "Too many syllables. Too ethnic. This isn't *National Geographic,* buddy. Come up with something catchy."

I shrug. "Golden Pond?"

"Golden Pond?" Scott twists his mouth. "Is this a fucking joke? Are we making a Katherine Hepburn movie?"

"Katherine who?"

"Fuck it," Scott says. "Jones, use that noggin of yours."

"Midas Creek," Jones, one of the cameramen, says.

"That's rad, baby!" Scott exclaims, stamping and wobbling the boat.

When we finally reach the clump of mangrove where the gold spills out, they rev up the cameras again. Scott says, "Gobi, tell us about your friend's mysterious death. You were there when everything went down, weren't you?"

When he puts the mic to my mouth, I hesitate and stutter. Scott motions for Jones to stop. He then says, "Just tell the audience nice and clean. We'll do details later with a VO."

When we come up to the pool, I notice that it has expanded. Not by much, but it has spread. I feel sick—that humming, tickling feeling in my chest was back, like the first time I visited. Scott and his men is too busy capturing footage. We could see the pool. The coppice surroundin it is petrified gold. We stop just where the gold stops. "What the hell is that thing?" Jones asks me.

"I think we've found ourselves a gold mine, gentlemen," Scott says.

We go back to the boat and Jones uploads the footage to the laptop. He plays some of the footage back and points out something strange to the other cameraman. "What do you see?" Scott asks.

"A strange frequency," Jones says, as he shows us a shallow oscillation on a graph as the video plays. "25Hz."

"That's the vibration that was in my chest?" the other camerman asks.

"An extraterrestrial frequency, Jones?" Scott asks, his grin widening. "Do we have an alien crash-landing here in the Caribbean? Give it to me, baby!"

"No, Scott, it's—"

Scott cuts in, "I can see it now. Our episode title: *The Tropical Swamp Thing: Exposed!* What do you think?"

Jones shrugs and Scott's grin quickly fades. "You're right. We'll be up to our asses with copyright infringements." So, the golden pool ain't enough? I want to say. Your

viewers ain't care bout Yadav's death? You need a cheap-ass Hollywood monster to go with it too?

And I just blurt out, "This fuckin thing is probably going to engulf the world one day, give it a couple hundred years!"

The men all turn to me, the boat bobbing in the marsh, the slow tickling still in our chests. "Gobi! That's rad, baby!" Scott yells out. "We'll roll with that, yeah. That's some fucking terrifying shit there." At the same time, a scarlet ibis zooms above us and crashes right dead into a mangrove tree, hitting the water.

"Jesus," Jones mutters as he looked at the ibis' dead body floating in the water, at the mouth of the mangrove clump.

Jesus can't save we now, I think. This ain't the world ending. No. This is the world's scripted rebirth. Hiranyagarbha. And the golden womb is here in Trinidad—in a cluster of mangroves in Caroni Swamp.

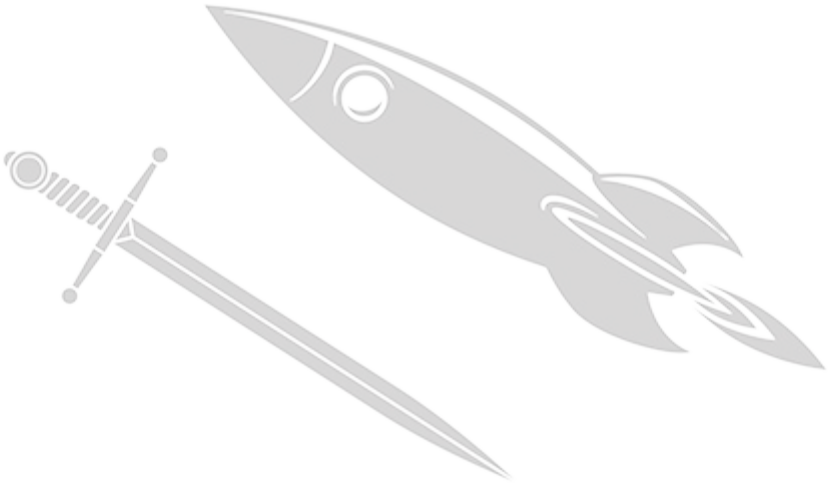
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Kevin Jared Hosein currently resides in Trinidad and Tobago and is the Caribbean regional winner of the 2015 Commonwealth Short Story Prize. His first book, *Littletown Secrets,* was published in 2013. In addition to having fiction published in *Moko Caribbean Arts and Letters,* his work has been featured in anthologies such as *Pepperpot; New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean; Jewels of the Caribbean;* and the Akashic Books series, *Mondays are Murder* and *Duppy Thursdays.* He has also been shortlisted twice for the Small Axe Prize for Prose. His novel, *The Repenters,* is being published by Peepal Tree Press in July 2016.

REPRINT FICTION

SELECTED BY NISI SHAWL



The Evening and the Morning and the Night

Octavia E. Butler | 9,400 words

When I was fifteen and trying to show my independence by getting careless with my diet, my parents took me to a Duryea-Gode disease ward. They wanted me to see, they said, where I was headed if I wasn't careful. In fact, it was where I was headed no matter what. It was only a matter of when: now or later. My parents were putting in their vote for later.

I won't describe the ward. It's enough to say that when they brought me home, I cut my wrists. I did a thorough job of it, old Roman style in a bathtub of warm water. Almost made it. My father dislocated his shoulder breaking down the bathroom door. He and I never forgave each other for that day.

The disease got him almost three years later—just before I went off to college. It was sudden. It doesn't happen that way often. Most people notice themselves beginning to drift—or their relatives notice—and they make arrangements with their chosen institution. People who are noticed and who resist going in can be locked up for a week's observation. I don't doubt that that observation period breaks up a few families. Sending someone away for what turns out to be a false alarm . . . Well, it isn't the sort of thing the victim is likely to forgive or forget. On the other hand, not sending someone away in time—missing the signs or having a person go off suddenly without signs—is inevitably dangerous for the victim. I've never heard of it going as badly, though, as it did in my family. People normally injure only themselves when their time comes—unless someone is stupid enough to try to handle them without the necessary drugs or restraints.

My father had killed my mother, then killed himself. I wasn't home when it happened. I had stayed at school later than usual, rehearsing graduation exercises. By the time I got home, there were cops everywhere. There was an ambulance, and two attendants were wheeling someone out on a stretcher—someone covered. More than covered. Almost . . . bagged.

The cops wouldn't let me in. I didn't find out until later exactly what had happened. I wish I'd never found out. Dad had killed Mom, then skinned her completely. At least that's how I hope it happened. I mean I hope he killed her first. He broke some of her ribs, damaged her heart. Digging.

Then he began tearing at himself, through skin and bone, digging. He had managed to reach his own heart before he died. It was an especially bad example of the kind of thing that makes people afraid of us. It gets some of us into trouble for picking at a pimple or even for daydreaming. It has inspired restrictive laws, created problems with jobs, housing, schools . . . The Duryea-Gode Disease Foundation has spent millions telling the world that people like my father don't exist.

A long time later, when I had gotten myself together as best I could, I went to college—to the University of Southern California—on a Dilg scholarship. Dilg is the retreat you

try to send your out-of-control DGD relatives to. It's run by controlled DGDs like me, like my parents while they lived. God knows how any controlled DGD stands it. Anyway, the place has a waiting list miles long. My parents put me on it after my suicide attempt, but chances were, I'd be dead by the time my name came up.

I can't say why I went to college—except that I had been going to school all my life and didn't know what else to do. I didn't go with any particular hope. Hell, I knew what I was in for eventually. I was just marking time. Whatever I did was just marking time. If people were willing to pay me to go to school and mark time, why not do it?

The weird part was, I worked hard, got top grades. If you work hard enough at something that doesn't matter, you can forget for a while about the things that do.

Sometimes I thought about trying suicide again. How was it I'd had the courage when I was fifteen but didn't have it now? Two DGD parents, both religious, both as opposed to abortion as they were to suicide. So they had trusted God and the promises of modern medicine and had a child. But how could I look at what had happened to them and trust anything?

I majored in biology. Non-DGDs say something about our disease makes us good at the sciences—genetics, molecular biology, biochemistry . . . That something was terror. Terror and a kind of driving hopelessness. Some of us went bad and became destructive before we had to—yes, we did produce more than our share of criminals. And some of us went good—spectacularly—and made scientific and medical history. These last kept the doors at least partly open for the rest of us. They made discoveries in genetics, found cures for a couple of rare diseases, made advances against other diseases that weren't so rare—including, ironically, some forms of cancer. But they'd found nothing to help themselves. There had been nothing since the latest improvements in the diet, and those came just before I was born. They, like the original diet, gave more DGDs the courage to have children. They were supposed to do for DGDs what insulin had done for diabetics—give us a normal or nearly normal life span. Maybe they had worked for someone somewhere. They hadn't worked for anyone I knew.

Biology school was a pain in the usual ways. I didn't eat in public anymore, didn't like the way people stared at my biscuits—cleverly dubbed "dog biscuits" in every school I'd ever attended. You'd think university students would be more creative. I didn't like the way people edged away from me when they caught sight of my emblem. I'd begun wearing it on a chain around my neck and putting it down inside my blouse, but people managed to notice it anyway. People who don't eat in public, who drink nothing more interesting than water, who smoke nothing at all—people like that are suspicious. Or rather, they make others suspicious. Sooner or later, one of those others, finding my fingers and wrists bare, would fake an interest in my chain. That would be that. I couldn't hide the emblem in my purse. If anything happened to me, medical people had to see it in time to avoid giving me the medications they might use on a normal person. It isn't just ordinary food we have to avoid, but about a quarter of a Physicians' Desk Reference of widely used drugs. Every now and then there are news stories about people who stopped

carrying their emblems—probably trying to pass as normal. Then they have an accident. By the time anyone realizes there is anything wrong, it's too late. So I wore my emblem. And one way or another, people got a look at it or got the word from someone who had. "She is!" Yeah.

At the beginning of my third year, four other DGDs and I decided to rent a house together. We'd all had enough of being lepers twenty-four hours a day. There was an English major. He wanted to be a writer and tell our story from the inside—which had only been done thirty or forty times before. There was a special education major who hoped the handicapped would accept her more readily than the able-bodied, a premed who planned to go into research, and a chemistry major who didn't really know what she wanted to do.

Two men and three women. All we had in common was our disease, plus a weird combination of stubborn intensity about whatever we happened to be doing and hopeless cynicism about everything else. Healthy people say no one can concentrate like a DGD. Healthy people have all the time in the world for stupid generalizations and short attention spans.

We did our work, came up for air now and then, ate our biscuits, and attended classes. Our only problem was housecleaning. We worked out a schedule of who would clean what when, who would deal with the yard, whatever. We all agreed on it; then, except for me, everyone seemed to forget about it. I found myself going around reminding people to vacuum, clean the bathroom, mow the lawn . . . I figured they'd all hate me in no time, but I wasn't going to be their maid, and I wasn't going to live in filth. Nobody complained. Nobody even seemed annoyed. They just came up out of their academic daze, cleaned, mopped, mowed, and went back to it. I got into the habit of running around in the evening reminding people. It didn't bother me if it didn't bother them.

"How'd you get to be housemother?" a visiting DGD asked.

I shrugged. "Who cares? The house works." It did. It worked so well that this new guy wanted to move in. He was a friend of one of the others, and another premed. Not bad looking.

"So do I get in or don't I?" he asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, you do," I said. I did what his friend should have done—introduced him around, then, after he left, talked to the others to make sure nobody had any real objections. He seemed to fit right in. He forgot to clean the toilet or mow the lawn, just like the others. His name was Alan Chi. I thought Chi was a Chinese name, and I wondered. But he told me his father was Nigerian and that in Ibo the word meant a kind of guardian angel or personal God. He said his own personal God hadn't been looking out for him very well to let him be born to two DGD parents. Him too.

I don't think it was much more than that similarity that drew us together at first. Sure, I liked the way he looked, but I was used to liking someone's looks and having him run like hell when he found out what I was. It took me a while to get used to the fact that Alan wasn't going anywhere.

I told him about my visit to the DGD ward when I was fifteen—and my suicide attempt afterward. I had never told anyone else. I was surprised at how relieved it made me feel to tell him. And somehow his reaction didn't surprise me.

"Why didn't you try again?" he asked. We were alone in the living room.

"At first, because of my parents," I said. "My father in particular. I couldn't do that to him again."

"And after him?"

"Fear. Inertia."

He nodded. "When I do it, there'll be no half measures. No being rescued, no waking up in a hospital later."

"You mean to do it?"

"The day I realize I've started to drift. Thank God we get some warning."

"Not necessarily."

"Yes, we do. I've done a lot of reading. Even talked to a couple of doctors. Don't believe the rumors non-DGDs invent."

I looked away, stared into the scarred, empty fireplace. I told him exactly how my father had died—something else I'd never voluntarily told anyone.

He sighed. "Jesus!"

We looked at each other.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I don't know."

He extended a dark, square hand, and I took it and moved closer to him. He was a dark, square man my height, half again my weight, and none of it fat. He was so bitter sometimes, he scared me.

"My mother started to drift when I was three," he said. "My father only lasted a few months longer. I heard he died a couple of years after he went into the hospital. If the two of them had had any sense, they would have had me aborted the minute my mother realized she was pregnant. But she wanted a kid no matter what. And she was Catholic." He shook his head. "Hell, they should pass a law to sterilize the lot of us."

"They?" I said.

"You want kids?"

"No, but—"

"More like us to wind up chewing their fingers off in some DGD ward."

"I don't want kids, but I don't want someone else telling me I can't have any."

He stared at me until I began to feel stupid and defensive. I moved away from him.

"Do you want someone else telling you what to do with your body?" I asked.

"No need," he said. "I had that taken care of as soon as I was old enough."

This left me staring. I'd thought about sterilization. What DGD hasn't? But I didn't know anyone else our age who had actually gone through with it. That would be like killing part of yourself—even though it wasn't a part you intended to use. Killing part of yourself when so much of you was already dead.

“The damned disease could be wiped out in one generation,” he said, “but people are still animals when it comes to breeding. Still following mindless urges, like dogs and cats.”

My impulse was to get up and go away, leave him to wallow in his bitterness and depression alone. But I stayed. He seemed to want to live even less than I did. I wondered how he’d made it this far.

“Are you looking forward to doing research?” I probed. “Do you believe you’ll be able to—”

“No.”

I blinked. The word was as cold and dead a sound as I’d ever heard.

“I don’t believe in anything,” he said.

I took him to bed. He was the only other double DGD I had ever met, and if nobody did anything for him, he wouldn’t last much longer. I couldn’t just let him slip away. For a while, maybe we could be each other’s reasons for staying alive.

He was a good student—for the same reason I was. And he seemed to shed some of his bitterness as time passed. Being around him helped me understand why, against all sanity, two DGDs would lock in on each other and start talking about marriage. Who else would have us?

We probably wouldn’t last very long, anyway. These days, most DGDs make it to forty, at least. But then, most of them don’t have two DGD parents. As bright as Alan was, he might not get into medical school because of his double inheritance. No one would tell him his bad genes were keeping him out, of course, but we both knew what his chances were. Better to train doctors who were likely to live long enough to put their training to use.

Alan’s mother had been sent to Dilg. He hadn’t seen her or been able to get any information about her from his grandparents while he was at home. By the time he left for college, he’d stopped asking questions. Maybe it was hearing about my parents that made him start again. I was with him when he called Dilg. Until that moment, he hadn’t even known whether his mother was still alive. Surprisingly, she was.

“Dilg must be good,” I said when he hung up. “People don’t usually . . . I mean . . .”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “People don’t usually live long once they’re out of control. Dilg is different.” We had gone to my room, where he turned a chair backward and sat down. “Dilg is what the others ought to be, if you can believe the literature.”

“Dilg is a giant DGD ward,” I said. “It’s richer—probably better at sucking in the donations—and it’s run by people who can expect to become patients eventually. Apart from that, what’s different?”

“I’ve read about it,” he said. “So should you. They’ve got some new treatment. They don’t just shut people away to die the way the others do.”

“What else is there to do with them? With us.”

“I don’t know. It sounded like they have some kind of . . . sheltered workshop. They’ve got patients doing things.”

"A new drug to control the self-destructiveness?"

"I don't think so. We would have heard about that."

"What else could it be?"

"I'm going up to find out. Will you come with me?"

"You're going up to see your mother."

He took a ragged breath. "Yeah. Will you come with me?"

I went to one of my windows and stared out at the weeds. We let them thrive in the backyard. In the front we mowed them, along with the few patches of grass.

"I told you my DGD ward experience."

"You're not fifteen now. And Dilg isn't some zoo of a ward."

"It's got to be, no matter what they tell the public. And I'm not sure I can stand it."

He got up, came to stand next to me. "Will you try?"

I didn't say anything. I focused on our reflections in the window glass—the two of us together. It looked right, felt right. He put his arm around me, and I leaned back against him. Our being together had been as good for me as it seemed to have been for him. It had given me something to go on besides inertia and fear. I knew I would go with him. It felt like the right thing to do.

"I can't say how I'll act when we get there," I said.

"I can't say how I'll act, either," he admitted. "Especially . . . when I see her."

He made the appointment for the next Saturday afternoon. You make appointments to go to Dilg unless you're a government inspector of some kind. That is the custom, and Dilg gets away with it.

We left L.A. in the rain early Saturday morning. Rain followed us off and on up the coast as far as Santa Barbara. Dilg was hidden away in the hills not far from San Jose. We could have reached it faster by driving up I-5, but neither of us were in the mood for all that bleakness. As it was, we arrived at one p.m. to be met by two armed gate guards. One of these phoned the main building and verified our appointment. Then the other took the wheel from Alan.

"Sorry," he said. "But no one is permitted inside without an escort. We'll meet your guide at the garage."

None of this surprised me. Dilg is a place where not only the patients but much of the staff has DGD. A maximum-security prison wouldn't have been as potentially dangerous. On the other hand, I'd never heard of anyone getting chewed up here. Hospitals and rest homes had accidents. Dilg didn't. It was beautiful—an old estate. One that didn't make sense in these days of high taxes. It had been owned by the Dilg family. Oil, chemicals, pharmaceuticals. Ironically, they had even owned part of the late, unlamented Hedeon Laboratories. They'd had a briefly profitable interest in Hedeonco: the magic bullet, the cure for a large percentage of the world's cancer and a number of serious viral diseases —and the cause of Duryea-Gode disease. If one of your parents was treated with Hedeonco and you were conceived after the treatments, you had DGD. If you had kids, you passed it on to them. Not everyone was equally affected. They didn't all commit

suicide or murder, but they all mutilated themselves to some degree if they could. And they all drifted—went off into a world of their own and stopped responding to their surroundings.

Anyway, the only Dilg son of his generation had had his life saved by Hedeonco. Then he had watched four of his children die before Doctors Kenneth Duryea and Jan Gode came up with a decent understanding of the problem and a partial solution: the diet. They gave Richard Dilg a way of keeping his next two children alive. He gave the big, cumbersome estate over to the care of DGD patients.

So the main building was an elaborate old mansion. There were other, newer buildings, more like guest houses than institutional buildings. And there were wooded hills all around. Nice country. Green. The ocean wasn't far away. There was an old garage and a small parking lot. Waiting in the lot was a tall, old woman. Our guard pulled up near her, let us out, then parked the car in the half-empty garage.

"Hello," the woman said, extending her hand. "I'm Beatrice Alcantara." The hand was cool and dry and startlingly strong. I thought the woman was DGD, but her age threw me. She appeared to be about sixty, and I had never seen a DGD that old. I wasn't sure why I thought she was DGD. If she was, she must have been an experimental model—one of the first to survive.

"Is it Doctor or Ms.?" Alan asked.

"It's Beatrice," she said. "I am a doctor, but we don't use titles much here."

I glanced at Alan, was surprised to see him smiling at her. He tended to go a long time between smiles. I looked at Beatrice and couldn't see anything to smile about. As we introduced ourselves, I realized I didn't like her. I couldn't see any reason for that either, but my feelings were my feelings. I didn't like her.

"I assume neither of you have been here before," she said, smiling down at us. She was at least six feet tall, and straight.

We shook our heads. "Let's go in the front way, then. I want to prepare you for what we do here. I don't want you to believe you've come to a hospital."

I frowned at her, wondering what else there was to believe. Dilg was called a retreat, but what difference did names make?

The house close up looked like one of the old-style public buildings—massive, baroque front with a single domed tower reaching three stories above the three-story house. Wings of the house stretched for some distance to the right and left of the tower, then cornered and stretched back twice as far. The front doors were huge—one set of wrought iron and one of heavy wood. Neither appeared to be locked. Beatrice pulled open the iron door, pushed the wooden one, and gestured us in.

Inside, the house was an art museum—huge, high ceilinged, tile floored. There were marble columns and niches in which sculptures stood or paintings hung. There were other sculptures displayed around the rooms. At one end of the rooms there was a broad staircase leading up to a gallery that went around the rooms. There more art was displayed. "All this was made here," Beatrice said. "Some of it is even sold from here.

Most goes to galleries in the Bay Area or down around L.A. Our only problem is turning out too much of it."

"You mean the patients do this?" I asked.

The old woman nodded. "This and much more. Our people work instead of tearing at themselves or staring into space. One of them invented the p.v. locks that protect this place. Though I almost wish he hadn't. It's gotten us more government attention than we like."

"What kind of locks?" I asked.

"Sorry. Palmprint-voiceprint. The first and the best. We have the patent." She looked at Alan. "Would you like to see what your mother does?"

"Wait a minute," he said. "You're telling us out-of-control DGDs create art and invent things?"

"And that lock," I said. "I've never heard of anything like that. I didn't even see a lock."

"The lock is new," she said. "There have been a few news stories about it. It's not the kind of thing most people would buy for their homes. Too expensive. So it's of limited interest. People tend to look at what's done at Dilg in the way they look at the efforts of idiot savants. Interesting, incomprehensible, but not really important. Those likely to be interested in the lock and able to afford it know about it." She took a deep breath, faced Alan again. "Oh, yes, DGDs create things. At least they do here."

"Out-of-control DGDs."

"Yes."

"I expected to find them weaving baskets or something—at best. I know what DGD wards are like."

"So do I," she said. "I know what they're like in hospitals, and I know what it's like here." She waved a hand toward an abstract painting that looked like a photo I had once seen of the Orion Nebula. Darkness broken by a great cloud of light and color. "Here we can help them channel their energies. They can create something beautiful, useful, even something worthless. But they create. They don't destroy."

"Why?" Alan demanded. "It can't be some drug. We would have heard."

"It's not a drug."

"Then what is it? Why haven't other hospitals—?"

"Alan," she said. "Wait."

He stood frowning at her.

"Do you want to see your mother?"

"Of course I want to see her!"

"Good. Come with me. Things will sort themselves out."

She led us to a corridor past offices where people talked to one another, waved to Beatrice, worked with computers . . . They could have been anywhere. I wondered how many of them were controlled DGDs. I also wondered what kind of game the old woman was playing with her secrets. We passed through rooms so beautiful and perfectly kept it

was obvious they were rarely used. Then at a broad, heavy door, she stopped us.

"Look at anything you like as we go on," she said. "But don't touch anything or anyone. And remember that some of the people you'll see injured themselves before they came to us. They still bear the scars of those injuries. Some of those scars may be difficult to look at, but you'll be in no danger. Keep that in mind. No one here will harm you." She pushed the door open and gestured us in.

Scars didn't bother me much. Disability didn't bother me. It was the act of self-mutilation that scared me. It was someone attacking her own arm as though it were a wild animal. It was someone who had torn at himself and been restrained or drugged off and on for so long that he barely had a recognizable human feature left, but he was still trying with what he did have to dig into his own flesh. Those are a couple of the things I saw at the DGD ward when I was fifteen. Even then I could have stood it better if I hadn't felt I was looking into a kind of temporal mirror.

I wasn't aware of walking through that doorway. I wouldn't have thought I could do it. The old woman said something, though, and I found myself on the other side of the door with the door closing behind me. I turned to stare at her.

She put her hand on my arm. "It's all right," she said quietly. "That door looks like a wall to a great many people."

I backed away from her, out of her reach, repelled by her touch. Shaking hands had been enough, for God's sake.

Something in her seemed to come to attention as she watched me. It made her even straighter. Deliberately, but for no apparent reason, she stepped toward Alan, touched him the way people do sometimes when they brush past—a kind of tactile "Excuse me." In that wide, empty corridor, it was totally unnecessary. For some reason, she wanted to touch him and wanted me to see. What did she think she was doing? Flirting at her age? I glared at her, found myself suppressing an irrational urge to shove her away from him. The violence of the urge amazed me.

Beatrice smiled and turned away. "This way," she said. Alan put his arm around me and tried to lead me after her.

"Wait a minute," I said, not moving.

Beatrice glanced around.

"What just happened?" I asked. I was ready for her to lie—to say nothing happened, pretend not to know what I was talking about.

"Are you planning to study medicine?" she asked.

"What? What does that have to do—?"

"Study medicine. You may be able to do a great deal of good." She strode away, taking long steps so that we had to hurry to keep up. She led us through a room in which some people worked at computer terminals and others with pencils and paper. It would have been an ordinary scene except that some people had half their faces ruined or had only one hand or leg or had other obvious scars. But they were all in control now. They were working. They were intent but not intent on self-destruction. Not one was digging into or

tearing away flesh. When we had passed through this room and into a small, ornate sitting room, Alan grasped Beatrice's arm.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What do you do for them?"

She patted his hand, setting my teeth on edge. "I will tell you," she said. "I want you to know. But I want you to see your mother first." To my surprise, he nodded, let it go at that.

"Sit a moment," she said to us.

We sat in comfortable, matching upholstered chairs—Alan looking reasonably relaxed. What was it about the old lady that relaxed him but put me on edge? Maybe she reminded him of his grandmother or something. She didn't remind me of anyone. And what was that nonsense about studying medicine?

"I wanted you to pass through at least one workroom before we talked about your mother—and about the two of you." She turned to face me. "You've had a bad experience at a hospital or a rest home?"

I looked away from her, not wanting to think about it. Hadn't the people in that mock office been enough of a reminder? Horror film office. Nightmare office.

"It's all right," she said. "You don't have to go into detail. Just outline it for me."

I obeyed slowly, against my will, all the while wondering why I was doing it.

She nodded, unsurprised. "Harsh, loving people, your parents. Are they alive?"

"No."

"Were they both DGD?"

"Yes, but . . . yes."

"Of course, aside from the obvious ugliness of your hospital experience and its implications for the future, what impressed you about the people in the ward?"

I didn't know what to answer. What did she want? Why did she want anything from me? She should have been concerned with Alan and his mother.

"Did you see people unrestrained?"

"Yes," I whispered. "One woman. I don't know how it happened that she was free. She ran up to us and slammed into my father without moving him. He was a big man. She bounced off, fell, and . . . began tearing at herself. She bit her own arm and . . . swallowed the flesh she'd bitten away. She tore at the wound she'd made with the nails of her other hand. She . . . I screamed at her to stop." I hugged myself, remembering the young woman, bloody, cannibalizing herself as she lay at our feet, digging into her own flesh. Digging. "They try so hard, fight so hard to get out."

"Out of what?" Alan demanded.

I looked at him, hardly seeing him.

"Lynn," he said gently. "Out of what?"

I shook my head. "Their restraints, their disease, the ward, their bodies . . ."

He glanced at Beatrice, then spoke to me again. "Did the girl talk?"

"No. She screamed."

He turned away from me uncomfortably. "Is this important?" he asked Beatrice.

"Very," she said.

"Well . . . can we talk about it after I see my mother?"

"Then and now." She spoke to me. "Did the girl stop what she was doing when you told her to?"

"The nurses had her a moment later. It didn't matter."

"It mattered. Did she stop?"

"Yes."

"According to the literature, they rarely respond to anyone," Alan said.

"True." Beatrice gave him a sad smile. "Your mother will probably respond to you, though."

"Is she? . . ." He glanced back at the nightmare office. "Is she as controlled as those people?"

"Yes, though she hasn't always been. Your mother works with clay now. She loves shapes and textures and—"

"She's blind," Alan said, voicing the suspicion as though it were fact. Beatrice's words had sent my thoughts in the same direction. Beatrice hesitated. "Yes," she said finally. "And for . . . the usual reason. I had intended to prepare you slowly."

"I've done a lot of reading."

I hadn't done much reading, but I knew what the usual reason was. The woman had gouged, ripped, or otherwise destroyed her eyes. She would be badly scarred. I got up, went over to sit on the arm of Alan's chair. I rested my hand on his shoulder, and he reached up and held it there.

"Can we see her now?" he asked.

Beatrice got up. "This way," she said.

We passed through more workrooms. People painted; assembled machinery; sculpted in wood, stone; even composed and played music. Almost no one noticed us. The patients were true to their disease in that respect. They weren't ignoring us. They clearly didn't know we existed. Only the few controlled-DGD guards gave themselves away by waving or speaking to Beatrice. I watched a woman work quickly, knowledgeably, with a power saw. She obviously understood the perimeters of her body, was not so dissociated as to perceive herself as trapped in something she needed to dig her way out of. What had Dilg done for these people that other hospitals did not do? And how could Dilg withhold its treatment from the others?

"Over there we make our own diet foods," Beatrice said, pointing through a window toward one of the guest houses. "We permit more variety and make fewer mistakes than the commercial preparers. No ordinary person can concentrate on work the way our people can."

I turned to face her. "What are you saying? That the bigots are right? That we have some special gift?"

"Yes," she said. "It's hardly a bad characteristic, is it?"

"It's what people say whenever one of us does well at something. It's their way of denying us credit for our work."

"Yes. But people occasionally come to the right conclusions for the wrong reasons." I shrugged, not interested in arguing with her about it.

"Alan?" she said. He looked at her.

"Your mother is in the next room."

He swallowed, nodded. We both followed her into the room.

Naomi Chi was a small woman, hair still dark, fingers long and thin, graceful as they shaped the clay. Her face was a ruin. Not only her eyes but most of her nose and one ear were gone. What was left was badly scarred. "Her parents were poor," Beatrice said. "I don't know how much they told you, Alan, but they went through all the money they had, trying to keep her at a decent place. Her mother felt so guilty, you know. She was the one who had cancer and took the drug . . . Eventually, they had to put Naomi in one of those state-approved, custodial-care places. You know the kind. For a while, it was all the government would pay for. Places like that . . . well, sometimes if patients were really troublesome—especially the ones who kept breaking free—they'd put them in a bare room and let them finish themselves. The only things those places took good care of were the maggots, the cockroaches, and the rats."

I shuddered. "I've heard there are still places like that."

"There are," Beatrice said, "kept open by greed and indifference." She looked at Alan. "Your mother survived for three months in one of those places. I took her from it myself. Later I was instrumental in having that particular place closed."

"You took her?" I asked.

"Dilg didn't exist then, but I was working with a group of controlled DGDs in L.A. Naomi's parents heard about us and asked us to take her. A lot of people didn't trust us then. Only a few of us were medically trained. All of us were young, idealistic, and ignorant. We began in an old frame house with a leaky roof. Naomi's parents were grabbing at straws. So were we. And by pure luck, we grabbed a good one. We were able to prove ourselves to the Dilg family and take over these quarters."

"Prove what?" I asked.

She turned to look at Alan and his mother. Alan was staring at Naomi's ruined face, at the ropy, discolored scar tissue. Naomi was shaping the image of an old woman and two children. The gaunt, lined face of the old woman was remarkably vivid—detailed in a way that seemed impossible for a blind sculptress.

Naomi seemed unaware of us. Her total attention remained on her work. Alan forgot about what Beatrice had told us and reached out to touch the scarred face.

Beatrice let it happen. Naomi did not seem to notice. "If I get her attention for you," Beatrice said, "we'll be breaking her routine. We'll have to stay with her until she gets back into it without hurting herself. About half an hour."

"You can get her attention?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Can she? . . ." Alan swallowed. "I've never heard of anything like this. Can she talk?"

"Yes. She may not choose to, though. And if she does, she'll do it very slowly."

"Do it. Get her attention."

"She'll want to touch you."

"That's all right. Do it."

Beatrice took Naomi's hands and held them still, away from the wet clay. For several seconds Naomi tugged at her captive hands, as though unable to understand why they did not move as she wished.

Beatrice stepped closer and spoke quietly. "Stop, Naomi." And Naomi was still, blind face turned toward Beatrice in an attitude of attentive waiting. Totally focused waiting.

"Company, Naomi."

After a few seconds, Naomi made a wordless sound.

Beatrice gestured Alan to her side, gave Naomi one of his hands. It didn't bother me this time when she touched him. I was too interested in what was happening. Naomi examined Alan's hand minutely, then followed the arm up to the shoulder, the neck, the face. Holding his face between her hands, she made a sound. It may have been a word, but I couldn't understand it. All I could think of was the danger of those hands. I thought of my father's hands.

"His name is Alan Chi, Naomi. He's your son." Several seconds passed.

"Son?" she said. This time the word was quite distinct, though her lips had split in many places and had healed badly. "Son?" she repeated anxiously. "Here?"

"He's all right, Naomi. He's come to visit."

"Mother?" he said.

She reexamined his face. He had been three when she started to drift. It didn't seem possible that she could find anything in his face that she would remember. I wondered whether she remembered she had a son.

"Alan?" she said. She found his tears and paused at them. She touched her own face where there should have been an eye, then she reached back toward his eyes. An instant before I would have grabbed her hand, Beatrice did it.

"No!" Beatrice said firmly.

The hand fell limply to Naomi's side. Her face turned toward Beatrice like an antique weather vane swinging around. Beatrice stroked her hair, and Naomi said something I almost understood. Beatrice looked at Alan, who was frowning and wiping away tears.

"Hug your son," Beatrice said softly.

Naomi turned, groping, and Alan seized her in a tight, long hug. Her arms went around him slowly. She spoke words blurred by her ruined mouth but just understandable.

"Parents?" she said. "Did my parents . . . care for you?" Alan looked at her, clearly not understanding.

"She wants to know whether her parents took care of you," I said.

He glanced at me doubtfully, then looked at Beatrice.

"Yes," Beatrice said. "She just wants to know that they cared for you."

"They did," he said. "They kept their promise to you, Mother."

Several seconds passed. Naomi made sounds that even Alan took to be weeping, and he tried to comfort her.

"Who else is here?" she said finally.

This time Alan looked at me. I repeated what she had said.

"Her name is Lynn Mortimer," he said. "I'm . . ." He paused awkwardly. "She and I are going to be married."

After a time, she moved back from him and said my name. My first impulse was to go to her. I wasn't afraid or repelled by her now, but for no reason I could explain, I looked at Beatrice.

"Go," she said. "But you and I will have to talk later."

I went to Naomi, took her hand.

"Bea?" she said.

"I'm Lynn," I said softly.

She drew a quick breath. "No," she said. "No, you're . . ."

"I'm Lynn. Do you want Bea? She's here."

She said nothing. She put her hand to my face, explored it slowly. I let her do it, confident that I could stop her if she turned violent. But first one hand, then both, went over me very gently.

"You'll marry my son?" she said finally.

"Yes."

"Good. You'll keep him safe."

As much as possible, we'd keep each other safe. "Yes," I said.

"Good. No one will close him away from himself. No one will tie him or cage him." Her hand wandered to her own face again, nails biting in slightly.

"No," I said softly, catching the hand. "I want you to be safe, too."

The mouth moved. I think it smiled. "Son?" she said.

He understood her, took her hand.

"Clay," she said. Lynn and Alan in clay. "Bea?"

"Of course," Beatrice said. "Do you have an impression?"

"No!" It was the fastest that Naomi had answered anything. Then, almost childlike, she whispered. "Yes."

Beatrice laughed. "Touch them again if you like, Naomi. They don't mind."

We didn't. Alan closed his eyes, trusting her gentleness in a way I could not. I had no trouble accepting her touch, even so near my eyes, but I did not delude myself about her. Her gentleness could turn in an instant. Naomi's fingers twitched near Alan's eyes, and I spoke up at once, out of fear for him.

"Just touch him, Naomi. Only touch."

She froze, made an interrogative sound.

"She's all right," Alan said.

"I know," I said, not believing it. He would be all right, though, as long as someone watched her very carefully, nipped any dangerous impulses in the bud.

"Son!" she said, happily possessive. When she let him go, she demanded clay, wouldn't touch her old-woman sculpture again. Beatrice got new clay for her, leaving us to soothe her and ease her impatience. Alan began to recognize signs of impending destructive behavior. Twice he caught her hands and said no. She struggled against him until I spoke to her. As Beatrice returned, it happened again, and Beatrice said, "No, Naomi." Obediently Naomi let her hands fall to her sides.

"What is it?" Alan demanded later when we had left Naomi safely, totally focused on her new work—clay sculptures of us. "Does she only listen to women or something?"

Beatrice took us back to the sitting room, sat us both down, but did not sit down herself. She went to a window and stared out. "Naomi only obeys certain women," she said. "And she's sometimes slow to obey. She's worse than most—probably because of the damage she managed to do to herself before I got her." Beatrice faced us, stood biting her lip and frowning. "I haven't had to give this particular speech for a while," she said. "Most DGDs have the sense not to marry each other and produce children. I hope you two aren't planning to have any—in spite of our need." She took a deep breath. "It's a pheromone. A scent. And it's sex-linked. Men who inherit the disease from their fathers have no trace of the scent. They also tend to have an easier time with the disease. But they're useless to use as staff here. Men who inherit from their mothers have as much of the scent as men get. They can be useful here because the DGDs can at least be made to notice them. The same for women who inherit from their mothers but not their fathers. It's only when two irresponsible DGDs get together and produce girl children like me or Lynn that you get someone who can really do some good in a place like this." She looked at me. "We are very rare commodities, you and I. When you finish school you'll have a very well-paying job waiting for you."

"Here?" I asked.

"For training, perhaps. Beyond that, I don't know. You'll probably help start a retreat in some other part of the country. Others are badly needed." She smiled humorlessly. "People like us don't get along well together. You must realize that I don't like you any more than you like me."

I swallowed, saw her through a kind of haze for a moment. Hated her mindlessly—just for a moment.

"Sit back," she said. "Relax your body. It helps."

I obeyed, not really wanting to obey her but unable to think of anything else to do. Unable to think at all. "We seem," she said, "to be very territorial. Dilg is a haven for me when I'm the only one of my kind here. When I'm not, it's a prison."

"All it looks like to me is an unbelievable amount of work," Alan said.

She nodded. "Almost too much." She smiled to herself. "I was one of the first double DGDs to be born. When I was old enough to understand, I thought I didn't have much time. First I tried to kill myself. Failing that, I tried to cram all the living I could into the small amount of time I assumed I had. When I got into this project, I worked as hard as I could to get it into shape before I started to drift. By now I wouldn't know what to do

with myself if I weren't working."

"Why haven't you . . . drifted?" I asked.

"I don't know. There aren't enough of our kind to know what's normal for us."

"Drifting is normal for every DGD sooner or later."

"Later, then."

"Why hasn't the scent been synthesized?" Alan asked. "Why are there still concentration-camp rest homes and hospital wards?"

"There have been people trying to synthesize it since I proved what I could do with it. No one has succeeded so far. All we've been able to do is keep our eyes open for people like Lynn." She looked at me. "Dilg scholarship, right?"

"Yeah. Offered out of the blue."

"My people do a good job keeping track. You would have been contacted just before you graduated or if you dropped out."

"Is it possible," Alan said, staring at me, "that she's already doing it? Already using the scent to . . . influence people?"

"You?" Beatrice asked.

"All of us. A group of DGDs. We all live together. We're all controlled, of course, but . . ." Beatrice smiled. "It's probably the quietest house full of kids that anyone's ever seen."

I looked at Alan, and he looked away. "I'm not doing anything to them," I said. "I remind them of work they've already promised to do. That's all."

"You put them at ease," Beatrice said. "You're there. You . . . well, you leave your scent around the house. You speak to them individually. Without knowing why, they no doubt find that very comforting. Don't you, Alan?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose I must have. From my first visit to the house, I knew I wanted to move in. And when I first saw Lynn, I . . ." He shook his head. "Funny, I thought all that was my idea."

"Will you work with us, Alan?"

"Me? You want Lynn."

"I want you both. You have no idea how many people take one look at one workroom here and turn and run. You may be the kind of young people who ought to eventually take charge of a place like Dilg."

"Whether we want to or not, eh?" he said.

Frightened, I tried to take his hand, but he moved it away. "Alan, this works," I said. "It's only a stopgap, I know. Genetic engineering will probably give us the final answers, but for God's sake, this is something we can do now!"

"It's something you can do. Play queen bee in a retreat full of workers. I've never had any ambition to be a drone."

"A physician isn't likely to be a drone," Beatrice said.

"Would you marry one of your patients?" he demanded. "That's what Lynn would be doing if she married me—whether I become a doctor or not."

She looked away from him, stared across the room. "My husband is here," she said softly. "He's been a patient here for almost a decade. What better place for him . . . when his time came?"

"Shit!" Alan muttered. He glanced at me. "Let's get out of here!" He got up and strode across the room to the door, pulled at it, then realized it was locked. He turned to face Beatrice, his body language demanding she let him out. She went to him, took him by the shoulder, and turned him to face the door. "Try it once more," she said quietly. "You can't break it. Try."

Surprisingly, some of the hostility seemed to go out of him. "This is one of those p.v. locks?" he asked.

"Yes."

I set my teeth and looked away. Let her work. She knew how to use this thing she and I both had. And for the moment, she was on my side.

I heard him make some effort with the door. The door didn't even rattle. Beatrice took his hand from it, and with her own hand flat against what appeared to be a large brass knob, she pushed the door open.

"The man who created that lock is nobody in particular," she said. "He doesn't have an unusually high I.Q., didn't even finish college. But sometime in his life he read a science-fiction story in which palmprint locks were a given. He went that story one better by creating one that responded to voice or palm. It took him years, but we were able to give him those years. The people of Dilg are problem solvers, Alan. Think of the problems you could solve!"

He looked as though he were beginning to think, beginning to understand. "I don't see how biological research can be done that way," he said. "Not with everyone acting on his own, not even aware of other researchers and their work."

"It is being done," she said, "and not in isolation. Our retreat in Colorado specializes in it and has—just barely—enough trained, controlled DGDs to see that no one really works in isolation. Our patients can still read and write—those who haven't damaged themselves too badly. They can take each other's work into account if reports are made available to them. And they can read material that comes in from the outside. They're working, Alan. The disease hasn't stopped them, won't stop them."

He stared at her, seemed to be caught by her intensity—or her scent. He spoke as though his words were a strain, as though they hurt his throat. "I won't be a puppet. I won't be controlled . . . by a goddamn smell!"

"Alan—"

"I won't be what my mother is. I'd rather be dead!"

"There's no reason for you to become what your mother is."

He drew back in obvious disbelief.

"Your mother is brain damaged—thanks to the three months she spent in that custodial-care toilet. She had no speech at all when I met her. She's improved more than you can imagine. None of that has to happen to you. Work with us, and we'll see that none of it

happens to you."

He hesitated, seemed less sure of himself. Even that much flexibility in him was surprising. "I'll be under your control or Lynn's," he said.

She shook her head. "Not even your mother is under my control. She's aware of me. She's able to take direction from me. She trusts me the way any blind person would trust her guide."

"There's more to it than that."

"Not here. Not at any of our retreats."

"I don't believe you."

"Then you don't understand how much individuality our people retain. They know they need help, but they have minds of their own. If you want to see the abuse of power you're worried about, go to a DGD ward."

"You're better than that, I admit. Hell is probably better than that. But . . ."

"But you don't trust us."

He shrugged.

"You do, you know." She smiled. "You don't want to, but you do. That's what worries you, and it leaves you with work to do. Look into what I've said. See for yourself. We offer DGDs a chance to live and do whatever they decide is important to them. What do you have, what can you realistically hope for that's better than that?"

Silence. "I don't know what to think," he said finally.

"Go home," she said. "Decide what to think. It's the most important decision you'll ever make."

He looked at me. I went to him, not sure how he'd react, not sure he'd want me no matter what he decided.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

The question startled me. "You have a choice," I said. "I don't. If she's right . . . how could I not wind up running a retreat?"

"Do you want to?"

I swallowed. I hadn't really faced that question yet. Did I want to spend my life in something that was basically a refined DGD ward? "No!"

"But you will."

". . . Yes." I thought for a moment, hunted for the right words. "You'd do it."

"What?"

"If the pheromone were something only men had, you would do it."

That silence again. After a time he took my hand, and we followed Beatrice out to the car. Before I could get in with him and our guard-escort, she caught my arm. I jerked away reflexively. By the time I caught myself, I had swung around as though I meant to hit her. Hell, I did mean to hit her, but I stopped myself in time. "Sorry," I said with no attempt at sincerity.

She held out a card until I took it. "My private number," she said. "Before seven or after nine, usually. You and I will communicate best by phone."

I resisted the impulse to throw the card away. God, she brought out the child in me.

Inside the car, Alan said something to the guard. I couldn't hear what it was, but the sound of his voice reminded me of him arguing with her—her logic and her scent. She had all but won him for me, and I couldn't manage even token gratitude. I spoke to her, low voiced.

"He never really had a chance, did he?"

She looked surprised. "That's up to you. You can keep him or drive him away. I assure you, you can drive him away."

"How?"

"By imagining that he doesn't have a chance." She smiled faintly. "Phone me from your territory. We have a great deal to say to each other, and I'd rather we didn't say it as enemies."

She had lived with meeting people like me for decades. She had good control. I, on the other hand, was at the end of my control. All I could do was scramble into the car and floor my own phantom accelerator as the guard drove us to the gate. I couldn't look back at her. Until we were well away from the house, until we'd left the guard at the gate and gone off the property, I couldn't make myself look back. For long, irrational minutes, I was convinced that somehow if I turned, I would see myself standing there, gray and old, growing small in the distance, vanishing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1947 in Pasadena, California, Octavia E. Butler began writing at age 10, using a Remington typewriter. After attending the Clarion Workshop, she started to sell short stories professionally and began writing novels. She published fourteen novels and numerous short stories, earning many honors including two Hugo Awards, two Nebula Awards, and a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant. Butler passed away in 2006.

Double Time

John Chu | 4,500 words



Art by Odera Igbokwe

Publisher's Note: This text of this story includes one string of non-English characters that some older e-reading devices may not be able to render properly. If your e-reader is one such device, try clicking/tapping on the Unknown Symbol characters; we've inserted an image of the foreign characters that should display in your reader.

Skaters in black practice outfits swerved around Shelly. Her music was playing over the PA system. She had right of way. A scattering of figure skating fans sat in the rink's hard, blue, plastic seats. Even to a practice session, some had brought their flags. Her mom sat near the boards and waved her US flag as though if only it had shook more fiercely last night, Shelly would have landed her triple Lutz-triple toe jump combination in the short program.

The arena twinkled. Flashes of gold shimmered into fans sitting near to their slightly younger selves. Apparently, something would happen in the next few minutes they wanted to jump back in time to see again. The Shelly who had just finished this practice skate stood by the boards with Mr. Song watching the current Shelly skate. She ignored all of that. If she didn't wrestle her attention back onto the ice, she'd miss the combination

again. No one wanted that, least of all her mom. She set her mind back onto mustering as much technical excellence and expression into her free skate as possible. She was still jet-lagged.

Her music ended and the announcer called out the program length. Three minutes and fifty-nine seconds. In a competition, much longer than four minutes and she'd be assessed a time penalty. In a practice session, much longer than four minutes and the start of her practice skate would be too far in the past to jump back to watch. Mom insisted that Shelly witness her run throughs because video never gave a good sense of a skater's sense of speed or ice coverage and because Shelly never remembered what she'd actually done on the ice. Of course, seeing yourself skating live and in person wasn't even remotely creepy. Unfortunately, Mr. Song didn't see any harm. Shelly skated to the boards, ignored the four-minute-older version of her rushing back onto the ice, then squeezed the time jumper latched to her wrist. Its digital display started counting down from four and a half minutes.

The world flashed gold. It spun in one direction. Her stomach spun in the other. Mr. Song and the rest of the rink shimmered into being. He nodded then handed Shelly her blade guards. As she put them on, her name blasted over the PA system as the next to skate. Mr. Song and Shelly settled by the boards to watch her slightly younger self skate to the middle of the rink then strike the same opening pose as Michelle Kwan had in her iconic 1998 free skate to the same music, *Lyra Angelica.* Shelly was just relieved Mom hadn't insisted that she simply ape Michelle Kwan move for move. Free skate requirements had changed too much since then.

"I shouldn't be here." Shelly winced at her opening triple Lutz. "I'm not even supposed to be a Senior yet."

She was because, last season, Mom had made Shelly take her Senior-level test behind Mr. Song's back. When he found out, he wasn't angry. Mr. Song was never angry. He merely pointed out in his own wry way that Shelly had her work cut out for her. She had placed a miraculous sixth at Nationals and now here she was starting this season with a bye out of Regionals so that she could compete against the best figure skaters on the planet instead. Because that wouldn't lead to utter and all-consuming humiliation. No, not at all.

"Don't worry about tonight's free skate. You'll do fine." Mr. Song folded his arms across his chest. "It's your first Senior international competition. Even your mom should understand you're not expected to do well. I mean, Michelle Kwan's first in 1993, she placed sixth after the short program and ended up seventh overall out of eight."

"Mom doesn't do pre-1995 or post-2000 Kwan." Shelly slumped, leaning into the boards. "As far as she's concerned, Michelle Kwan never placed lower than second in any competition."

"I'm sure she has a better—Hey, that's interesting." Mr. Song had a penchant for understatement. He pointed out Tatiana Mishina, both of them, spinning side-by-side on the ice. "She's going to do it."

The latest rule changes had just come into effect. All summer long, the rumor had been that the European and World gold medalist would time jump from the end of her free skate back to the start to skate the whole thing with herself in unison. Done wrong, the penalties would take her off the podium, possibly out of the top ten. Done right and well, the bonus points she'd rack up could make her unbeatable.

Dread slithered through Shelly's body. It coiled around her heart and lungs then squeezed. Tatiana had just landed a flawless side-by-side triple Lutz-triple toe combination, earning Mom's rapt attention. Usually, Mom was busy scribbling down Shelly's mistakes. Right now, though, the gleam of the brilliant idea in Mom's mind was as impossible to miss as the flashes of gold popping across the arena as fans jumped back in time.

"Maybe Tatiana's just trying to psych out her competitors?"

Mr. Song looked at Shelly with the same incomprehension he did when Mom spoke in Mandarin too quickly. As though each sound made sense by itself, but not in sequence. Like Shelly, he was sort of fluent enough.

"Do *you* like going into double time?"

Just thinking about it made Shelly woozy. Besides, the amount of time you jumped back had to be made up with jumps forward. Lots of people did that at night just before going to sleep, but all those chunks of time added up. Between schoolwork and practice, she got little enough sleep as it was.

"We can convince Mom that I'm not good enough to time jump back—"

"Actually, skating just the last two minutes in double time isn't a bad idea. You already train clean double run throughs—"

"But, Mr. Song—"

"Shelly, this is this future. Next season, all the elite skaters will do some part or all of their free skates in double time. We can train it and try it out at Sectionals. Even if it's a disaster, you'll still place well enough to qualify for Nationals."

Her music ended. The Shelly on the ice started skating for the boards.

"Can't talk about it now. I'm coming here. Meeting me would be way too awkward."

Shelly threw off her blade guards. She rushed back onto the ice, ignoring her four-minute-younger self.

• • • •

By the time the Zambonis rolled onto the ice, Shelly had finished seventh like her namesake, Michelle Kwan, also had her first time out. A whole two skaters had placed behind her. However, while Mom wanted Shelly to skate like Michelle Kwan, this was not what Mom had in mind. Mom didn't share Shelly's relief at not placing last. For days afterwards, as Mom drove them to and from Shelly's three daily practices, silence hung in the car like the heavy air before a storm.

The car's headlights barely lit the empty street and Shelly's flashlight barely lit her AP

Chemistry textbook. She was oddly grateful for the quiet. Not acing her chemistry exam would have made Mom about as happy as coming in seventh. The exam would have been easier had Mom allowed her to take regular chemistry first. She squeezed in classes between practices. Half days of school had its advantages, actually. No one really had the chance to call her a "ho" any more. Yes, it was her last name, sort of, but really? The name-calling had gotten old long before high school.

"Shelly, Mr. Song and I have had a talk."

Shelly sank into her seat. She'd hoped skating in unison with herself would be simple. A week where the two hers spun out of sync, didn't land jumps at the same time, not to mention didn't hit their end poses at the same time had changed her mind. Her unison had improved since, but it couldn't possibly be perfect enough for Mom yet.

"Mom." Her ribcage seemed to shrink, squeezing the air from her lungs. "Isn't getting one international assignment this season good enough? Besides, Mr. Song said I don't need to skate in double time to win Sectionals."

"何穎珊." Shelly's full name. The only thing worse would be if Mom continued speaking in Mandarin. "Your father and I did not come to this country so that our eventual child could be merely good enough at anything. In any case, you won't be competing at Sectionals."

"I won't?" Shelly refused to get her hopes up. No way that Mom had decided Shelly didn't need to skate anymore. Figure skating was an expensive sport. Mom and Dad had already given up so much for her.

"No, the USFSA has given you a bye through to Nationals. You'll be taking Emily Takahashi's remaining Grand Prix assignment next week."

Emily had suffered a stress fracture a month or so ago during her first Grand Prix competition of the season. The reigning US National gold medalist, Four Continents gold medalist, and World silver medalist had expected to recover in time for her second Grand Prix. Apparently not.

"Oh." Panic forced the air out of Shelly. "And I'll be skating in double time during my free skate?"

"Of course." Mom signaled her turn into the rink's parking lot. "I expect you to win this."

Shelly knew better than to argue with Mom. She slipped her textbook into her backpack. Skaters who might make the podium at Worlds skated the Grand Prix series. So much for a tune-up event to test skating in double time.

• • • •

The opening notes of Shelly's free skate filled the rink. She slid over the ice in quick, elegant arcs. Tonight, the music's ethereal joy washed over her as her heart pounded through her chest. She'd nailed her triple Lutz-triple toe combination in the short program and was in second place entering the free skate by a healthy margin. Against some of the

world's best, if she delivered the skate she'd been practicing for the past month, she might end up third overall. She'd stand on the podium at a Grand Prix competition. And, finally, Mom would be proud of her.

That joy lasted until her first jumping pass. She two-footed the landing of her triple Lutz, then squeaked out only a single toe loop in combination. Her jumps went downhill from there. She rolled through her falls, determined that they wouldn't disrupt the choreography or flow of her program.

In the second half, she singled her second triple Lutz in more ways than one. Her future self was late or maybe her present self was rushing ahead of the music. Only one of her was on the ice to attempt the jump when she popped it, turning only one revolution in the air before landing.

Shelly's slightly older self showed up just in time for the side-by-side triple loop. Older Shelly landed a triple. Younger Shelly landed a double instead. Even with the bonus for elements completed in the second half of the program, she was hemorrhaging points.

Her lungs burned. Her body stung from the falls. The ice felt like mud beneath her skates. She'd never been so relieved to reach the combination spin that ended her program. By the time the older Shelly hit her final pose and the younger Shelly jumped back into double time, she'd landed two clean triples out of seven including her final jump, the side-by-side triple Salchow.

She hadn't exactly covered herself in glory but figure skating audiences were always generous. Their applause thundered across the rink even when someone skated like a human Zamboni. Mom's disappointment pounded through her head though and she hadn't even gotten off the ice yet.

Flowers and product placements dotted the kiss and cry area. Shelly and Mr. Song sat on a bench waiting for her score. The backdrop showed mountains and a camera was trained on them, capturing their reactions. Her humiliation had been and would continue to be broadcast worldwide. However, she refused to cry.

"Well, that was a learning experience." Mr. Song rubbed his hands together. "Day after tomorrow, once we're back home, we'll look at the footage and we'll try it again so we get it right for Nationals."

"Mom has to be so disappointed in me." Maybe Shelly would cry after all.

"Don't start." Mr. Song crossed his arms over his chest. "You never gave up and you fought for every point. If the entire skate had been like those last thirty seconds, you'd be looking forward to your score right now. I'm sure your mom knows that."

Her score boomed over the PA system. She'd tumbled from second place to last overall. Skating in double time was stupid. Only two other skaters had attempted it here.

• • • •

After that free skate, of course what Shelly wanted more than anything else in the

world was to be strapped into the seat next to Mom's on the plane trip home. Mom sat by the aisle reading some engineering journal on her ereader. Shelly sat by the window staring at her tablet. Words gathered in dense blocks covered half the screen while a keyboard covered the other half. She'd rather have been sleeping but an analysis of the macaronic language in the works of James Joyce wouldn't write itself. Shelly kind of wished it would. Taking AP English early hadn't been her idea.

"I'm sorry, Mom." Avoiding the free skate from hell any longer would have just made it worse. "I'll do better at Nationals."

"It's okay. I haven't been reasonable." Mom reached for her bag sitting under the seat in front of her. She exchanged her ereader for an eye mask and neck pillow. "I was in grad school when I fell in love with Michelle Kwan's skating. When you were four and decided you wanted to skate, I was so happy, but skaters like her come once in a lifetime. I shouldn't have expected you to—You won't skate in double time any more. I'll talk to Mr. Song when we get home."

With that, Mom shut off her overhead light then went to sleep. The drone of engines covered up any other whispered conversations, isolating Shelly within her pool of light.

Tears welled in her eyes. Air wouldn't stay in her lungs and it was all she could do not to sob. She had never wanted to skate in double time and now she didn't have to. For once, Mom had relented. Shelly should have been relieved, so why did she feel so awful?

Shelly returned to her tablet. Her fingers tapped the keyboard while she blinked away her tears.

• • • •

It had been at least a decade since Mr. Song skated competitively but, in skates, he always looked as though he could land quad Lutzes as a warm up. On the ice, Mr. Song might have been a student waiting for his coach rather than a coach waiting for his student. Only Senior-level skaters trained this early in the morning and, as they warmed up on the ice, Shelly took her time lacing her skates.

Even if she had just come back from a competition, she couldn't blame how long she was taking on jet-lag. She was stalling and she knew it. Nationals was only six weeks away. This wasn't the time to argue with Mr. Song, but life didn't seem to be timing itself for her convenience.

She skated towards Mr. Song. He spotted the time jumper on her wrist then smiled.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"You were the one who said skating the last two minutes in double time wasn't a bad idea."

A mock seriousness spread across his face. "Your mother is not someone to be defied."

"Which is why we're not telling her."

"We hadn't prepared nearly well enough before. It'll be tougher this time." He spread

his hands, showing her his palms. “Lots of unison work in double time. Do you have time elsewhere in the day to lose? Your mom’s not going to notice that you’re suddenly nowhere to be found for minutes at a time whenever you jump ahead to compensate?”

“Sure, I’ve worked it all out.” In truth, she had no clue. She’d take her chances to jump ahead as she found them.

“And triple run throughs.” If she could skate for twelve minutes straight in practice, she could survive skating six in competition.

“I know.”

“Well, let’s get started then.” Mr. Song grinned as he rubbed his hands and Shelly started cross-stroking around the rink.

The next six weeks lurched by like the stick shift that she couldn’t drive. Between school, all that skating in double time, and the sleep she wasn’t getting, Shelly didn’t have time to wonder if she was doing the right thing.

• • • •

The less Shelly thought about her short program at Nationals, the better. The judges had rather generously placed her sixth, about ten points behind a still recovering Emily Takahashi in first. For the free skate, Shelly had drawn last in the skate order. Her free skate seemed more like a formality they had to plow through than anything to do with deciding who would advance to either Four Continents or Worlds.

The crowd cheered as she skated to center ice. They gasped when a human-shaped flash of gold on the ice turned into Shelly’s future self. Emily Takahashi had backed off skating her entire routine in double time to spare her healing toe, skating only the back half that way as Shelly had also planned. The time jumper on future Shelly’s wrist counted down from just over four minutes. Future her had gone too far back in time. Years seemed to pass before the world stopped teetering for either of them.

The referee signaled a warning. If Shelly didn’t start now, she’d be disqualified.

Future Shelly shrugged as if to say, “Well, nothing to do about it except to think of this as the second half of a double run through.” Future Shelly should have known how this skate would go having already skated it with herself. Realistically, though, if she ever remembered how she skated, Mom wouldn’t have made her watch her own practices. They struck their opening poses then the music started.

Michelle Kwan once said that to skate *Lyra Angelica,* she just went onto the ice, then thought of angels. Shelly, on the other hand, focused on one element at a time, ticking each off her mental list, then pretending it never happened, especially if it hadn’t gone perfectly.

The two Shellys skated as one, hitting every jump and spin in unison. They glided across the rink etching intricate patterns in swift arcs on the ice. Her lungs burned and her legs grew rubbery. For three minutes and fifty-nine seconds, she was the avenging angel. Her every edge and gesture was determined to prove that she could too skate. She refused

to implode on the ice. Not again.

Finally, the two Shellys hit their final pose to the last beat of the music and the younger disappeared with a flash of gold into the past. She might have under-rotated her triple Salchow and skipped some steps in her footwork. The Technical Caller would sort that out via slow-motion video replay after her skate.

The audience exploded into generous, even for Nationals, applause. Flowers wrapped in cellophane, teddy bears, and other stuffed animals fell like thick hail on the ice. Tiny girls, ten years old at most, swarmed the rink collecting it all. Everyone in the audience appeared to be . . . standing?

Shelly bowed. Every breath flayed her lungs and her legs felt like water. Getting to the kiss and cry felt as difficult as her eight minutes of skating. Relief that this horrible season was finally over pushed her off the ice.

It wouldn't be enough to please Mom, but she'd done the best she could. As far as Shelly was concerned, this skate meant more than any medal at Nationals. If she left the sport now, it'd be on a high note. Maybe she would quit. Now that her season was over, she'd have some time to think about it.

Mr. Song sat next to Shelly. He steepled his fingers, an amused expression on his face.

"You forgot to recalibrate your time jumper after this morning's practice session?" His amusement broke into a smile. "You realize now that the judges know what you're capable of, they're going to expect this every time."

"That's not funny." She'd look peeved at him except they were under the glare of a camera, waiting to catch her reaction to her score, if they ever got around to announcing it. "At least I'll never have to do that again."

"Excuse me?" Mr. Song stared up at a scoreboard that steadfastly refused to update with Shelly's scores. "Come Monday, we work on your short program and fine tune this free skate. We gave away a few points you'll need for Worlds."

Her scores boomed over the PA system and scrolled onto the scoreboard. They were too high. She'd won the free skate, beating Emily Takahashi by just under ten points, and placed second overall with no one left to skate. If she'd only fully rotated that Salchow, she might have won the whole thing. The audience exploded into applause again.

Her hands covered her mouth in surprise. She stood and waved to the audience before sitting down again.

"How?" The inevitable fell on Shelly like a boulder. The USFSA was going to send her to both Four Continents and Worlds. So much for quitting.

"Well, you didn't win because you didn't quite fill the short program-sized hole you'd dug for yourself." Mr. Song shrugged. "In any case, Ms. Takahashi will decline her inevitable Four Continents assignment. The USFSA will want her to fully heal so that she can skate her entire program in double time at Worlds. That means you, Shelly, are now America's best chance to defend its gold medal at Four Continents. Congratulations."

"Oh." The world lurched beneath her. She gripped her chair for support.

"You look so disappointed. Yes, we both know you could have won this, but placing

second and being named to the Worlds team in your second season as a Senior is not a bad thing." Mr. Song gently patted Shelly's back. "Don't worry about your mom. She'll see that."

Winning this thing had been the last thing on Shelly's mind. And she'd given up on the notion of pleasing Mom.

A reporter came up to Shelly. Then another. And then another. Suddenly, everyone wanted to interview her. She found herself wishing that Mom would barge in to tell her what to say.

• • • •

After the medal ceremony, Shelly jumped ahead to compensate for the double time during her free skate. It cost her only a moment to create four minutes when no one could find her. By the time she sneaked out of the rink, the crowd was breaking up. People were heading to the parking garage, to the subway, or to the shuttle back to the hotel. Lamps, benches, and piles of snow lined the way. Sparks of gold twinkled in the distance, undoubtedly from people time jumping back to catch the shuttle. Mom and Mr. Song sat on a bench scanning the crowd. Her silver medal still lay cold in her pocket. It ought to have a chance to warm up before she faced Mom. Not only had Shelly disobeyed her, but she had done so in spectacular fashion and on national TV. If she'd won, she might have gotten away with it. Stupid triple Salchow.

"Shelly." Mr. Song waved then jogged to her. Mom pushed against the tide of the shuttle-bound in the distance. "You don't need to avoid your mom."

"Um . . . I—"

"You know she's so proud of you." He smiled at the disbelief on her face. "Really, she was just saying—"

"何穎珊, don't worry me like that. I've been looking for you everywhere." Mom planted herself next to Mr. Song. "You skated your entire program in double time."

"Yes, Mom." Shelly stared at her feet. The time of reckoning for disobeying Mom had come.

"What has Mr. Song told you about your triple Salchow? You could have beat Emily Takahashi." Mom paused to catch her breath. "He and I were just talking about the rest of this season and the next season. A gold at Four Continents is a given but Worlds—"

"Hey, that's Emily." Shelly pointed at a clump wearing thick, hooded coats. One of them might have been Emily. "I should go congratulate her."

She ran off before Mom could say otherwise. Time was awasting if she wanted to check out what Mr. Song had said. The time jumper couldn't take you back any further than about five minutes. She circled around to hide behind the pile of snow next to the bench where Mom and Mr. Song had talked, then squeezed the time jumper latched to her wrist.

Her gaze faded from gold into benches, lamps and piles of snow although the air still

glittered with time jumping. Mr. Song sat on the bench. Mom paced around it, marking a ring of cement on the snow-dusted path. Shelly caught them in middle of small talk about the weather, Dad, and Mr. Song's boyfriend. Eventually, the conversation drifted to Worlds, Mom's plans for global domination of ladies' figure skating, and Shelly.

"I've known she was up to something for weeks. She can't hide her jumps forward in time as well as she thinks she can." Mom stopped pacing and her arms fell to her sides. "I couldn't be prouder of her. Even that first novice competition, she was so awful but she tried so hard. She's everything I could have asked for in a daughter."

Mom had never spoken those words to Shelly, ever. As Mom nattered on, Shelly's hand moved to the time jumper on her wrist, waiting for its display to count down to zero so she could jump back in time again. Even though she was now the favorite to win Four Continents, Mom's words to her were about her under-rotated triple Salchow and losing to Emily Takahashi. The only way she'd ever hear how proud Mom was of her again in person was to jump back in time before the moment slipped too far back for her time jumper to reach.

Shelly looked down the path. Another Shelly hid behind a street lamp, listening.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Chu is a microprocessor architect by day, a writer, translator, and podcast narrator by night. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boston Review, Uncanny, Asimov's Science Fiction, Apex Magazine,* and *Tor.com*. His story "The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere" won the 2014 Hugo Award for Best Short Story.

Delhi

Vandana Singh | 7,400 words



Tonight he is intensely aware of the city: its ancient stones, the flat-roofed brick houses, threads of clotheslines, wet, bright colors waving like pennants, neem tree-lined roads choked with traffic. There's a bus going over the bridge under which he has chosen to sleep. The night smells of jasmine, and stale urine, and the dust of the cricket field on the other side of the road. A man is lighting a bidi near him: face lean, half in shadow, and he thinks he sees himself. He goes over to the man, who looks like another layabout. "My name is Aseem," he says. The man, reeking of tobacco, glares at him, coughs and spits, "Kya chahiye?" Aseem steps back in a hurry. No, that man is not Aseem's older self; anyway, Aseem can't imagine he would take up smoking bidis at any point in his life. He leaves the dubious shelter of the bridge, the quiet lane that runs under it, and makes his way through the litter and anemic streetlamps to the neon-bright highway. The new city is less confusing, he thinks; the colors are more solid, the lights dazzling, so he can't see the apparitions as clearly. But once he saw a milkman going past him on Shahjahan road, complete with humped white cow and tinkling bell. Under the stately, ancient trees that partly shaded the streetlamps, the milkman stopped to speak to his cow and faded into the dimness of twilight.

When he was younger he thought the apparitions he saw were ghosts of the dead, but

now he knows that is not true. Now he has a theory that his visions are tricks of time, tangles produced when one part of the time-stream rubs up against another and the two cross for a moment. He has decided (after years of struggle) that he is not insane after all; his brain is wired differently from others, enabling him to discern these temporal coincidences. He knows he is not the only one with this ability, because some of the people he sees also see him, and shrink back in terror. The thought that he is a ghost to people long dead or still to come in this world both amuses and terrifies him.

He's seen more apparitions in the older parts of the city than anywhere else, and he's not sure why. There is plenty of history in Delhi, no doubt about that—the city's past goes back into myth, when the Pandava brothers of the epic Mahabharata first founded their fabled capital, Indraprastha, some three thousand years ago. In medieval times alone there were seven cities of Delhi, he remembers, from a well-thumbed history textbook—and the eighth city was established by the British during the days of the Raj. The city of the present day, the ninth, is the largest. Only for Aseem are the old cities of Delhi still alive, glimpsed like mysterious islands from a passing ship, but real, nevertheless. He wishes he could discuss his temporal visions with someone who would take him seriously and help him understand the nature and limits of his peculiar malady, but ironically, the only sympathetic person he's met who shares his condition happened to live in 1100 A.D. or thereabouts, the time of Prithviraj Chauhan, the last great Hindu ruler of Delhi.

He was walking past the faded white colonnades of some building in Connaught Place when he saw her: an old woman in a long skirt and shawl, making her way sedately across the car park, her body rising above the road and falling below its surface in parallel with some invisible topography. She came face to face with Aseem—and saw him. They both stopped. Clinging to her like gray ribbons were glimpses of her environs—he saw mist, the darkness of trees behind her. Suddenly, in the middle of summer, he could smell fresh rain. She put a wondering arm out toward him but didn't touch him. She said: "What age are you from?" in an unfamiliar dialect of Hindi. He did not know how to answer the question, or how to contain within him that sharp shock of joy. She, too, had looked across the barriers of time and glimpsed other people, other ages. She named Prithviraj Chauhan as her king. Aseem told her he lived some 900 years after Chauhan. They exchanged stories of other visions—she had seen armies, spears flashing, and pale men with yellow beards, and a woman in a metal carriage, crying. He was able to interpret some of this for her before she began to fade away. He started toward her as though to step into her world, and ran right into a pillar. As he picked himself off the ground he heard derisive laughter. Under the arches a shoeshine boy and a man chewing betel leaf were staring at him, enjoying the show.

Once he met the mad emperor, Mohammad Shah. He was walking through Red Fort one late afternoon, avoiding clumps of tourists and their clicking cameras. He was feeling particularly restless; there was a smoky tang in the air, because some gardener in the grounds was burning dry leaves. As the sun set, the red sandstone fort walls glowed, then darkened. Night came, blanketing the tall ramparts, the lawns through which he strolled,

the shimmering beauty of the Pearl Mosque, the languorous curves of the now distant Yamuna that had once flowed under this marble terrace. He saw a man standing, leaning over the railing, dressed in a red silk sherwani, jewels at his throat, a gem studded in his turban. He smelled of wine and rose attar, and he was singing a song about a night of separation from the Beloved, slurring the words together.

Bairan bhayii raat sakhiya . . .

Mammad Shah piya sada Rangila . . .

Mohammad Shah Rangila, early 1700s, Aseem recalled. The Emperor who loved music, poetry, and wine more than anything, who ignored warnings that the Persian king was marching to Delhi with a vast army . . . "Listen, king," Aseem whispered urgently, wondering if he could change the course of history, "You must prepare for battle. Else Nadir Shah will overrun the city. Thousands will be butchered by his army . . ."

The king lifted wine-darkened eyes. "Begone, wraith!"

Sometimes he stops at the India Gate lawns in the heart of modern Delhi and buys ice cream from a vendor, and eats it sitting by one of the fountains that Lutyens built. Watching the play of light on the shimmering water, he thinks about the British invaders, who brought one of the richest and oldest civilizations on Earth to abject poverty in only two hundred years. They built these great edifices, gracious buildings, and fountains, but even they had to leave it all behind. Kings came and went, the goras came and went, but the city lives on. Sometimes he sees apparitions of the goras, the palefaces, walking by him or riding on horses. Each time he yells out to them: "Your people are doomed. You will leave here. Your Empire will crumble." Once in a while they glance at him, startled, before they fade away.

In his more fanciful moments he wonders if he hasn't, in some way, caused history to happen the way it does. Planted a seed of doubt in a British officer's mind about the permanency of the Empire. Despite his best intentions, convinced Mohammad Shah that the impending invasion is not a real danger but a ploy wrought against him by evil spirits. But he knows that apart from the Emperor, nobody he has communicated with is of any real importance in the course of history, and that he is simply deluding himself about his own significance.

Still, he makes compulsive notes of his more interesting encounters. He carries with him at all times a thick, somewhat shabby notebook, one half of which is devoted to recording these temporal adventures. But because the apparitions he sees are so clear, he is sometimes not certain whether the face he glimpses in the crowd, or the man passing him by on a cold night, wrapped in shawls, belong to this time or some other. Only some incongruity—spatial or temporal—distinguishes the apparitions from the rest.

Sometimes he sees landscapes, too, but rarely—a skyline dotted with palaces and temple spires, a forest in the middle of a busy thoroughfare—and, strangest of all, once, an array of tall, jeweled towers reaching into the clouds. Each such vision seems to be charged with a peculiar energy, like a scene lit up by lightning. And although the apparitions are apparently random and don't often repeat, there are certain places where

he sees (he thinks) the same people again and again. For instance, while traveling on the Metro he almost always sees people in the subway tunnels, floating through the train and the passengers on the platforms, dressed in tatters, their faces pale and unhealthy as though they have never beheld the sun. The first time he saw them, he shuddered. "The Metro is quite new," he thought to himself, "and the first underground train system in Delhi. So what I saw must be in the future . . ."

One day, he tells himself, he will write a history of the future.

• • • •

The street is Nai Sarak, a name he has always thought absurd. New Road, it means, but this road has not been new in a very long time. He could cross the street in two jumps if it wasn't so crowded with people, shoulder to shoulder. The houses are like that too, hunched together with windows like dull eyes, and narrow, dusty stairways and even narrower alleys in between. The ground floors are taken up by tiny, musty shops containing piles of books that smell fresh and pungent, a wake-up smell like coffee. It is a hot day, and there is no shade. The girl he is following is just another Delhi University student looking for a bargain, trying not to get jostled or groped in the crowd, much less have her purse stolen. There are small, barefoot boys running around with wire carriers of lemon-water in chipped glasses, and fat old men in their undershirts behind the counters, bargaining fiercely with pale, defenseless college students over the hum of electric fans, rubbing clammy hands across their hairy bellies, while they slurp their ice drinks, signaling to some waif when the transaction is complete, so that the desired volume can be deposited into the feverish hands of the student. Some of the shop keepers like to add a little lecture on the lines of "Now, my son, study hard, make your parents proud . . ." Aseem hasn't been here in a long time (since his own college days in fact); he is not prepared for any of this, the brightness of the day, the white dome of the mosque rising up behind him, the old stone walls of the old city engirdling him, enclosing him in people and sweat and dust. He's dazzled by the white kurtas of the men, the neat beards and the prayer caps; this is of course the Muslim part of the city, Old Delhi, but not as romantic as his grandmother used to make it sound. He has a rare flash of memory into a past where he was a small boy listening to the old woman's tales. His grandmother was one of the Hindus who never went back to old Delhi, not after the madness of Partition in 1947, the Hindu-Muslim riots that killed thousands, but he still remembers how she spoke of the places of her girlhood: parathe-walon-ki-gali, the lane of the paratha-makers, where all the shops sell freshly-cooked flatbreads of every possible kind, stuffed with spiced potatoes or minced lamb, or fenugreek leaves, or crushed cauliflower and fiery red chillies; and Dariba Kalan, where after hundreds of years they still sell the best and purest silver in the world, delicate chains and anklets and bracelets. Among the crowds that throng these places, he has seen the apparitions of courtesans and young men, and the blood and thunder of invasions, and the bodies of princes hanged by British soldiers. To

him the old city, surrounded by high, crumbling, stone walls, is like the heart of a crone who dreams perpetually of her youth.

The girl who's caught his attention walks on. Aseem hasn't been able to get a proper look at her—all he's noticed are the dark eyes, and the death in them. After all these years in the city he's learned to recognize a certain preoccupation in the eyes of some of his fellow citizens: the desire for the final anonymity that death brings.

Sometimes, as in this case, he knows it before they do.

The girl goes into a shop. The proprietor, a young man built like a wrestler, is dressed only in cotton shorts. The massage-man is working his back, kneading and sculpting the slick, gold muscles. The young man says: "Advanced Biochemistry? Watkins? One copy, only one copy left." He shouts into the dark, cavernous interior, and the requisite small boy comes up, bearing the volume as though it were a rare book.

The girl's face shows too much relief; she's doomed even before the bargaining begins. She parts with her money with a resigned air, steps out into the noisy brightness, and is caught up with the crowd in the street like a piece of wood tossed in a river. She pushes and elbows her way through it, fending off anonymous hands that reach toward her breasts or back. He loses sight of her for a moment, but there she is, walking past the mosque to the bus stop on the main road. At the bus stop, she catches Aseem's glance and gives him the pre-emptive cold look. Now there's a bus coming, filled with people, young men hanging out of the doorways as though on the prow of a sailboat. He sees her struggling through the crowd toward the bus, and at the last minute, she's right in its path. The bus is not stopping but (in the tantalizing manner of Delhi buses) barely slowing, as though to play catch with the crowd. It is an immense green and yellow metal monstrosity, bearing down on her, as she stands rooted, clutching her bag of books. This is Aseem's moment. He lunges at the girl, pushing her out of the way, grabbing her before she can fall to the ground. There is a roaring in his ears, the shriek of brakes, and the conductor yelling. Her books are scattered on the ground. He helps pick them up. She's trembling with shock. In her eyes he sees himself for a moment: a drifter, his face unshaven, his hair unkempt. He tells her: Don't do it, don't ever do it. Life is never so bereft of hope. You have a purpose you must fulfill. He's repeating it like a mantra, and she's looking bewildered, as though she doesn't understand that she was trying to kill herself. He can see that he puzzles her: His grammatical Hindi and his fair English labels him middle class and educated, like herself, but his appearance says otherwise. Although he knows she's not the woman he is seeking, he pulls out the computer printout just to be sure. No, she's not the one. Cheeks too thin, chin not sharp enough. He pushes one of the business cards into her hand and walks away. From a distance he sees that she's looking at the card in her hand and frowning. Will she throw it away? At the last minute, she shoves it into her bag with the books. He remembers all too clearly the first time someone gave him one of the cards. "Worried About Your Future? Consult Pandit Vidyanath. Computerized and Air-Conditioned Office. Discover Your True Purpose in Life." There is a logo of a beehive and an address in South Delhi.

Later he will write up this encounter in the second half of his notebook. In three years, he has filled this part almost to capacity. He's stopped young men from flinging themselves off the bridges that span the Yamuna. He's prevented women from jumping off tall buildings, from dousing themselves with kerosene, from murderous encounters with city traffic. All this by way of seeking her, whose story will be the last in his book. But the very first story in this part of his notebook is his own . . .

• • • •

Three years ago. He is standing on a bridge over the Yamuna. There is a heavy, odorous fog in the air, the kind that mars winter mornings in Delhi. He is shivering because of the chill, and because he is tired, tired of the apparitions that have always plagued him, tired of the endless rounds of medications and appointments with doctors and psychologists. He has just written a letter to his fiancée, severing their already fragile relationship. Two months ago, he stopped attending his college classes. His mother and father have been dead a year and two years respectively, and there will be no one to mourn him, except for relatives in other towns who know him only by reputation as a person with problems. Last night he tried, as a last resort, to leave Delhi, hoping that perhaps the visions would stop. He got as far as the railway station. He stood in the line before the ticket counter, jostled by young men carrying hold-alls and aggressive matrons in bright saris. "Name?" said the man behind the window, but Aseem couldn't remember it. Around him, in the cavernous interior of the station, shouting, red-clad porters rushed past, balancing tiers of suitcases on their turbaned heads, and vast waves of passengers swarmed the stairs that led up across the platforms. People were nudging him, telling him to hurry up, but all he could think of were the still trains between the platforms, steaming in the cold air, hissing softly like warm snakes, waiting to take him away. The thought of leaving filled him with a sudden terror. He turned and walked out of the station. Outside, in the cold, glittering night, he breathed deep, fierce breaths of relief, as though he had walked away from his own death.

So here he is, the morning after his attempted escape, standing on the bridge, shivering in the fog. He notices a crack in the concrete railing, which he traces with his finger to the seedling of a pipal tree, growing on the outside of the rail. He remembers his mother pulling pipal seedlings out of walls and the paved courtyard of their house, over his protests. He remembers how hard it was for him to see, in each fragile sapling, the giant full-grown tree. Leaning over the bridge he finds himself wondering which will fall first —the pipal tree or the bridge. Just then he hears a bicycle on the road behind him, one that needs oiling, evidently, and before he knows it some rude fellow with a straggly beard has come out of the fog, pulled him off the railing and on to the road. "Don't be a fool, don't do it," says the stranger, breathing hard. His bicycle is lying on the roadside, one wheel still spinning. "Here, take this," the man says, pushing a small card into Aseem's unresisting hand. "Go see them. If they can't give you a reason to live, your own

mother wouldn't be able to."

The address on the card proves to be in a small marketplace near Sarojini Nagar. Around a dusty square of withered grass, where ubiquitous pariah dogs sleep fitfully in the pale sun, there is a row of shops. The place he seeks is a corner shop next to a vast jamun tree. Under the tree, three humped white cows are chewing cud, watching him with bovine indifference. Aseem makes his way through a jangle of bicycles, motor-rickshaws, and people, and finds himself before a closed door, with a small sign saying, only, "Pandit Vidyanath, Consultations." He goes in.

The Pandit is not in, but his assistant, a thin, earnest-faced young man, waves Aseem to a chair. The assistant is sitting behind a desk with a PC, a printer, and a plaque bearing his name: Om Prakash, BSc. Physics, (Failed) Delhi University. There is a window with the promised air-conditioner (apparently defunct) occupying its lower half. On the other side of the window is a beehive in the process of completion. Aseem feels he has come to the wrong place, and regrets already the whim that brought him here, but the beehive fascinates him, how it is still and in motion all at once, and the way the bees seem to be in concert with one another, as though performing a complicated dance. Two of the bees are crawling on the computer and there is one on the assistant's arm. Om Prakash seems completely unperturbed; he assures Aseem that the bees are harmless, and tries to interest him in array of bottles of honey on the shelf behind him. Apparently the bees belong to Pandit Vidyanath, a man of many facets, who keeps very busy because he also works for the city. (Aseem has a suspicion that perhaps the great man is no more than a petty clerk in a municipal office). Honey is ten rupees a bottle. Aseem shakes his head, and Om Prakash gets down to business with a noisy clearing of his throat, asking questions and entering the answers into the computer. By now Aseem is feeling like a fool.

"How does your computer know the future?" Aseem asks.

Om Prakash has a lanky, giraffe-like grace, although he is not tall. He makes a deprecating gesture with his long, thin hands that travels all the way up to his mobile shoulders.

"A computer is like a beehive. Many bits and parts, none is by itself intelligent. Combine together, and you have something that can think. This computer is not an ordinary one. Built by Pandit Vidyanath himself."

Om Prakash grins as the printer begins to whir.

"All persons who come here seek meaning. Each person has their own dharma, their own unique purpose. We don't tell future, because future is beyond us, Sahib. We tell them why they need to live."

He hands a printout to Aseem. When he first sees it, the page makes no sense. It consists of x's arranged in an apparently random pattern over the page. He holds it at a distance and sees—indistinctly—the face of a woman.

"Who is she?"

"It is for you to interpret what this picture means," says Om Prakash. "You must live because you need to meet this woman, perhaps to save her or be saved. It may mean that

you could be at the right place and time to save her from some terrible fate. She could be your sister or daughter, or a wife, or a stranger."

There are dark smudges for eyes, and the hint of a high cheekbone, and the swirl of hair across the cheek, half-obscuring the mouth. The face is broad and heart-shaped, narrowing to a small chin.

"But this is not very clear . . . It could be almost anyone. How will I know . . ."

"You will know when you meet her," Om Prakash says with finality. "There is no charge. Thank you sir, and here are cards for you to give other unfortunate souls."

Aseem takes the pack of business cards and leaves. He distrusts the whole business, especially the bit about no charge. No charge? In a city like Delhi?

But despite his doubts he finds himself intrigued. He had expected the usual platitudes about life and death, the fatalistic pronouncements peculiar to charlatan fortunetellers, but this fellow, Vidyanath, obviously is an original. That Aseem must live simply so he might be there for someone at the right moment: what an amusing, humbling idea! As the days pass, it grows on him, and he comes to believe it, if for nothing else than to have something in which to believe. He scans the faces of the people in the crowds, on the dusty sidewalks, the overladen buses, the Metro, and he looks for her. He lives so that he will cross her path some day. Over three years he has convinced himself that she is real, that she waits for him. He's made something of a life for himself, working at a photocopy shop in Lajpat Nagar, where he can sleep on winter nights, or making deliveries for shopkeepers in Defence Colony, who pay enough to keep him in food and clothing. Over three years he has handed out hundreds of the little business cards, and visited the address in South Delhi dozens of times. He's become used to the bees, the defunct air-conditioner, and even to Om Prakash. Although there is too much distance between them to allow friendship (a distance of temperament, really), Aseem has told Om Prakash about the apparitions he sees. Om Prakash receives these confidences with his rather foolish grin and much waggling of the head in wonder, and says he will tell Pandit Vidyanath. Only, each time Aseem visits, there is no sign of Pandit Vidyanath, so now Aseem suspects that there is no such person, that Om Prakash himself is the unlikely mind behind the whole business.

But sometimes he is scared of finding the woman. He imagines himself saving her from death or a fate worse than death, realizing at last his purpose. But after that, what awaits him? The oily embrace of the Yamuna?

Or will she save him in turn?

• • • •

One of the things he likes about the city is how it breaks all rules. Delhi is a place of contradictions—it transcends thesis and anti-thesis. Here he has seen both the hovels of the poor and the opulent monstrosities of the rich. At major intersections, where the rich wait impatiently in their air-conditioned cars for the light to change, he's seen bone-thin

waifs running from car to car, peddling glossy magazines like Vogue and Cosmopolitan. Amid the glitzy new high-rises are troupes of wandering cows, and pariah dogs; rhesus monkeys mate with abandon in the trees around Parliament House.

He hasn't slept well—last night the police raided the Aurobindo Marg sidewalk where he was sleeping. Some foreign VIP was expected in the morning, so the riffraff on the roadsides were driven off by stick-wielding policemen. This has happened many times before, but today Aseem is smarting with rage and humiliation: He has a bruise on his back where a policeman's stick hit him, and it burns in the relentless heat. Death lurks behind the walled eyes of the populace—but for once he is sick of his proximity to death. So he goes to the only place where he can leave behind the city without actually leaving its borders—another anomaly in a city of surprises. Amid the endless sprawl of brick houses and crowded roads, within Delhi's borders, there lies an entire forest: the Delhi Ridge, a green lung. The coolness of the forest beckons to him.

Only a little way from the main road, the forest is still, except for the subdued chirping of birds. He is in a warm, green womb. Under the acacia trees he finds an old ruin, one of the many nameless remains of Delhi's medieval era. After checking for snakes or scorpions, he curls up under a crumbling wall and dozes off.

Some time later, when the sun is lower in the sky and the heat not as intense, he hears a tapping sound, soft and regular, like slow rain on a tin roof. He sees a woman—a young girl—on the paved path in front of him, holding a cane before her. She's blind, obviously, and lost. This is no place for a woman alone. He clears his throat and she starts.

"Is someone there?"

She's wearing a long blue shirt over a salwaar of the same color, and there is a shawl around her shoulders. The thin material of her dupatta drapes her head, half-covering her face, blurring her features. He looks at her and sees the face in the printout. Or thinks he does.

"You are lost," he says, his voice trembling with excitement. He's fumbling in his pockets for the printout. Surely he must still be asleep and dreaming. Hasn't he dreamed about her many, many times already? "Where do you wish to go?"

She clutches her stick. Her shoulders slump.

"Naya Diwas lane, good sir. I am traveling from Jaipur. I came to meet my sister, who lives here, but I lost my papers. They say you must have papers. Or they'll send me to Neechi-Dilli with all the poor and the criminals. I don't want to go there! My sister has money. Please, sir, tell me how to find Naya Diwas."

He's never heard of Naya Diwas lane, or Neechi Dilli. New Day Lane? Lower Delhi? What strange names. He wipes the sweat off his forehead.

"There aren't any such places. Somebody has misled you. Go back to the main road, turn right, there is a marketplace there. I will come with you. Nobody will harm you. We can make enquiries there."

She thanks him, her voice catching with relief. She tells him she's heard many stories about the fabled city, and its tall, gem-studded minars that reach the sky, and the perfect

gardens. And the ships, the silver udan-khatolas, that fly across worlds. She's very excited to be here at last in the Immaculate City.

His eyes widen. He gets up abruptly, but she's already fading away into the trees. The computer printout is in his hand, but before he can get another look at her, she's gone.

What has he told her? Where is she going, in what future age, buoyed by the hope he has given her, which (he fears now) may be false?

He stumbles around the ruin, disturbing ground squirrels and a sleepy flock of jungle babblers, but he knows there is no hope of finding her again except by chance. Temporal coincidences have their own unfathomable rules. He's looked ahead to this moment so many times, imagined both joy and despair as a result of it, but never this apprehension, this uncertainty. He looks at the computer printout again. Is it mere coincidence that the apparition he saw looked like the image? What if Pandit Vidyanath's computer generated something quite random, and that his quest, his life for the past few years has been completely pointless? That Om Prakash or Vidyanath (if he exists) are enjoying an intricate joke at his expense? That he has allowed himself to be duped by his own hopes and fears?

But beyond all this, he's worried about this girl. There's only one thing to do—go to Om Prakash and get the truth out of him. After all, if Vidyanath's computer generated her image, and if Vidyanath isn't a complete fraud, he would know something about her, about that time. It is a forlorn hope, but it's all he has.

He takes the Metro on his way back. The train snakes its way under the city through the still-new tunnels, past brightly lit stations where crowds surge in and out and small boys peddle chai and soft drinks. At one of these stops, he sees the apparitions of people, their faces clammy and pale, clad in rags; he smells the stench of unwashed bodies too long out of the sun. They are coming out of the cement floor of the platform, as though from the bowels of the earth. He's seen them many times before; he knows they are from some future he'd rather not think about. But now it occurs to him with the suddenness of a blow that they are from the blind girl's future. Lower Delhi—Neechi Dilli—that is what this must be: a city of the poor, the outcast, the criminal, in the still-to-be-carved tunnels underneath the Delhi that he knows. He thinks of the Metro, fallen into disuse in that distant future, its tunnels abandoned to the dispossessed, and the city above a delight of gardens and gracious buildings, and tall spires reaching through the clouds. He has seen that once, he remembers. The Immaculate City, the blind girl called it.

By the time he gets to Vidyanath's shop, it is late afternoon, and the little square is filling with long shadows. At the bus stop where he disembarks, there is a young woman sitting, reading something. She looks vaguely familiar; she glances quickly at him but he notices her only peripherally.

He bursts into the room. Om Prakash is reading a magazine, which he sets down in surprise. A bee crawls out of his ear and flies up in a wide circle to the hive on the window. Aseem hardly notices.

"Where's that fellow, Vidyanath?"

Om Prakash looks mildly alarmed.

"My employer is not here, sir."

"Look, Om Prakash, something has happened, something serious. I met the girl of the printout. But she's from the future. I need to go back and find her. You must get Vidyanath for me. If his computer made the image of the girl, he must know how I can reach her."

Om Prakash shakes his head sadly.

"Panditji speaks only through the computer." He looks at the beehive, then at Aseem. "Panditji cannot control the future, you know that. He can only tell you your purpose. Why you are important."

"But I made a mistake! I didn't realize she was from another time. I told her something and she disappeared before I could do anything. She could be in danger! It is a terrible future, Om Prakash. There is a city below the city where the poor live. And above the ground there is clean air and tall minars and udan khatolas that fly between worlds. No dirt or beggars or poor people. Like when the foreign VIPs come to town and the policemen chase people like me out of the main roads. But Neechi Dilli is like a prison, I'm sure of it. They can't see the sun."

Om Prakash waves his long hands.

"What can I say, Sahib?"

Aseem goes around the table and takes Om Prakash by the shoulders.

"Tell me, Om Prakash, am I nothing but a strand in a web? Do I have a choice in what I do, or am I simply repeating lines written by someone else?"

"You can choose to break my bones, sir, and nobody can stop you. You can choose to jump into the Yamuna. Whatever you do affects the world in some small way. Sometimes the effect remains small, sometimes it grows and grows like a pipal tree. Causality, as we call it, is only a first-order effect. Second-order causal loops jump from time to time, as in your visions, sir. The future, Panditji says, is neither determined nor undetermined."

Aseem releases the fellow. His head hurts and he is very tired, and Om Prakash makes no more sense than usual. He feels emptied of hope. As he leaves he turns to ask Om Prakash one more question.

"Tell me, Om Prakash, this Pandit Vidyanath, if he exists—what is his agenda? What is he trying to accomplish? Who is he working for?"

"Pandit Vidyanath works for the city, as you know. Otherwise he works only for himself."

He goes out into the warm evening. He walks toward the bus stop. Over the chatter of people and the car horns on the street and the barking of pariah dogs, he can hear the distant buzzing of bees.

At the bus stop, the half-familiar young woman is still sitting, studying a computer print-out in the inadequate light of the streetlamp. She looks at him quickly, as though she wants to talk, but thinks better of it. He sits on the cement bench in a daze. Three years of anticipation, all for nothing. He should write down the last story and throw away his notebook.

Mechanically, he takes the notebook out and begins to write.

She clears her throat. Evidently she is not used to speaking to strange men. Her clothes and manner tell him she's from a respectable middle-class family. And then he remembers the girl he pushed away from a bus near Nai Sarak.

She's holding the page out to him.

"Can you make any sense of that?"

The printout is even more indistinct than his. He turns the paper around, frowns at it and hands it back to her.

"Sorry, I don't see anything."

She says:

"You could interpret the image as a crystal of unusual structure, or a city skyline with tall towers. Who knows? Considering that I'm studying biochemistry and my father really wants me to be an architect with his firm, it isn't surprising that I see those things in it. Amusing, really."

She laughs. He makes what he hopes is a polite noise.

"I don't know. I think the charming and foolish Om Prakash is a bit of a fraud. And you were wrong about me, by the way. I wasn't trying to . . . to kill myself that day."

She's sounding defensive now. He knows he was not mistaken about what he saw in her eyes. If it wasn't then, it would have been some other time—and she knows this.

"Still, I came here on an impulse," she says in a rush, "and I've been staring at this thing and thinking about my life. I've already made a few decisions about my future."

A bus comes lurching to a stop. She looks at it, and then at him, hesitates. He knows she wants to talk, but he keeps scratching away in his notebook. At the last moment before the bus pulls away, she swings her bag over her shoulder, waves at him, and climbs aboard. The look he had first noticed in her eyes has gone, for the moment. Today she's a different person.

He finishes writing in his notebook, and with a sense of inevitability that feels strangely right, he catches a bus that will take him across one of the bridges that span the Yamuna.

• • • •

At the bridge, he leans against the concrete wall looking into the dark water. This is one of his familiar haunts; how many people has he saved on this bridge? The pipal tree sapling is still growing in a crack in the cement—the municipality keeps uprooting it but it is buried too deep to die completely. Behind him there are cars and lights and the sound of horns, the jangle of bicycle bells. He sets his notebook down on top of the wall, wishing he had given it to someone, like that girl at the bus stop. He can't make himself throw it away. A peculiar lassitude, a detachment, has taken hold of him and he can think and act only in slow motion.

He's preparing to climb on to the wall of the bridge, his hands clammy and slipping on

the concrete, when he hears somebody behind him say "Wait!" He turns. It is like looking into a distorting mirror. The man is hollow-cheeked, with a few days' stubble on his chin, and the untidy thatch of hair has thinned and is streaked with silver. He's holding a bunch of cards in his hand. A welt mars one cheek, and the left sleeve is torn and stained with something rust-colored. The eyes are leopard's eyes, burning with a dreadful urgency. "Aseem," says the stranger who is not a stranger, panting as though he has been running, his voice breaking a little. "Don't . . ." He is already starting to fade. Aseem reaches out a hand and meets nothing but air. A million questions rise in his head, but before he can speak, the image is gone.

Aseem's first impulse is a defiant one. What if he were to jump into the river now—what would that do to the future, to causality? It would be his way of bowing out of the game that the city's been playing with him, of saying: I've had enough of your tricks. But the impulse dies. He thinks, instead, about Om Prakash's second-order causal loops, of sunset over the Red Fort, and the twisting alleyways of the old city, and death sleeping under the eyelids of the citizenry. He sits down slowly on the dusty sidewalk. He covers his face with his hands; his shoulders shake.

After a long while, he stands up. The road before him can take him anywhere, to the faded colonnades and bright bustle of Connaught Place, to the hush of public parks, with their abandoned cricket balls and silent swings, to old government housing settlements where, amid sleeping bungalows, ancient trees hold court before somnolent congresses of cows. The dusty by-lanes and broad avenues and crumbling monuments of Delhi lie before him, the noisy, lurid marketplaces, the high-tech glass towers, the glitzy enclaves with their citadels of the rich, the boot-boys and beggars at street corners . . . He has just to take a step and the city will swallow him up, receive him the way a river receives the dead. He is a corpuscle in its veins, blessed or cursed to live and die within it, seeing his purpose now and then, but never fully.

Staring unseeingly into the bright clamor of the highway, he has a wild idea that, he realizes, has been bubbling under the surface of his consciousness for a while. He recalls a picture he saw once in a book when he was a boy: a satellite image of Asia at night. On the dark bulge of the globe there were knots of light; like luminous fungi, he had thought at the time, stretching tentacles into the dark. He wonders whether complexity and vastness are sufficient conditions for a slow awakening, a coming-to-consciousness. He thinks about Om Prakash, his foolish grin and waggling head, and his strange intimacy with the bees. Will Om Prakash tell him who Pandit Vishwanath really is, and what it means to "work for the city?" He thinks not. What he must do, he sees at last, is what he has been doing all along: looking out for his own kind, the poor and the desperate, and those who walk with death in their eyes. The city's needs are alien, unfathomable. It is an entity in its own right, expanding every day, swallowing the surrounding countryside, crossing the Yamuna which was once its boundary, spawning satellite children, infant towns that it will ultimately devour. Now it is burrowing into the earth, and even later it will reach long fingers towards the stars.

What he needs most at this time is someone he can talk to about all this, someone who will take his crazy ideas seriously. There was the girl at the bus stop, the one he had rescued in Nai Sarak. Om Prakash will have her address. She wanted to talk; perhaps she will listen as well. He remembers the printout she had shown him and wonders if her future has something to do with the Delhi-to-come, the city that intrigues and terrifies him: the Delhi of udan khatolas, the "ships that fly between worlds," of starved and forgotten people in the catacombs underneath. He wishes he could have asked his future self more questions. He is afraid because it is likely (but not certain, it is never that simple) that some kind of violence awaits him, not just the violence of privation, but a struggle that looms indistinctly ahead, that will cut his cheek and injure his arm, and do untold things to his soul. But for now, there is nothing he can do, caught as he is in his own time-stream. He picks up his notebook. It feels strangely heavy in his hands. Rubbing sticky tears out of his eyes, he staggers slowly into the night.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vandana Singh is an Indian science fiction writer living in the Boston area. She has a Ph.D. in theoretical particle physics and teaches physics full-time at a small and lively state university. Her recent short fiction includes "Sailing the Antarsa" in the anthology *The Other Half of the Sky.* Many of her stories have been reprinted in best-of-the-year anthologies, and she is a winner of the Carl Brandon Parallax Award. Recent work includes a novella, "Entanglement," in the anthology *Hieroglyph,* and "Ambiguity Machines: An Examination" at *Tor.com.* She has a website at vandana-writes.com and a blog at vandanasingh.wordpress.com.

1965

Edmée Pardo (author) & Lesly Betancourt-González (translator) | 2,000 words

In 1965 the spacecraft *Mariner 4* passed Mars, taking pictures of the red planet, and the world—well, a part of the world—was astonished by the images. In Mexico City, the same year and month, Ángel Márquez, judo instructor, enthusiastically summoned his students with great hopes for progress and achievement. One can imagine their white suits, black belts, serious composure, and graceful movements patterned after the motions of crickets and other natural creatures. In that same fringe neighborhood, known as Echegaray, far from the eyes of God, my mother was befuddled by her second child, myself, a newborn girl, wailing for milk, while the newspapers displayed images from outer space and the cause of my father's absence since the preceding evening was confirmed. Meanwhile, my older sister, who really was not much older than me, being barely two at the time, was sleeping—and my mother hoped that somewhere in the universe or in the city there was peace to be found, for she longed to experience it.

My mother often spoke of peace. The television news broadcast images of Vietnam continuously, bombs, napalm, and such, while "I pray for peace, to be at peace, a world at peace" were phrases that constantly passed through my mother's lips. Peace has never played a central role in my life. Since my birth, there have been wars in every corner of the planet. In the movies, cities and entire nations are annihilated with the push of a button, and spaceships are blasted out of existence with the most sophisticated technology. Nonetheless, the war for peace continues to be waged in my mother's heart and in the hearts of many others. I have never known substantial peace, since my life has transpired in the shadow of paternal absence, war, pugnacious politicians, negligent martial arts instructors, and my mother's endless troubles.

When I started elementary school and learned that there was another student named Paz (Spanish for peace) in my class, I decided to make friends with her and invite her to my home, so that my mother could have what she wanted most in life, and what she sometimes found in the tiny sleeping pills in a bottle which she desperately withdrew from her bureau drawer.

"My mom would like you to come over for dinner," I said to Paz at recess. It was the first time we spoke.

She agreed.

"One of my friends wants to meet you. She's seen you when you come to pick me up," I said to my mother, who smiled gratifyingly.

This is how a long-lasting friendship was initiated not only between Paz and me but also between her and my mother. To compensate Paz for the benefits she bestowed on my mother, I gave her own mother hugs full of love. Her mother's plumpness, which provoked so much ridicule in school, was a haven for me—a warm, comfortable pillow upon which I could lay my head.

Sometimes I suspected that Paz and I had been switched at birth: that her mother was biologically mine and mine was hers. Paz's mother seemed to treat me with greater tenderness than Paz, and mine seemed to treat Paz with more intimacy than she treated me; we never could figure out if it this was out of common courtesy or an expression of their true allegiances. I learned about Paz's father because of the pictures in the house, through the stories expressed in them. As it happens, her father was Ángel Márquez, a judo instructor. The martial arts and the lessons of the Toyama were unknown to me then. Its practitioners seemed like latent criminals: Why else would they fight so violently? In time, I learned that the very night before the newspapers exposed the world to the first pictures of Mars from deep space, a mugging obstructed my father's presence at my birth. The image of a band of brutal men in white uniforms with black belts kicking my dad in the face entered my mind when I viewed the photograph of Paz's father, which probably explained why I disliked him without ever having met him; but the fact that he abandoned his family without warning one day, and Paz's mother never smiled again, also shaped my scornful opinion of the man.

NASA launched the *Viking 1* on a mission to Mars, inserting it into the planet's orbit in 1976. Talk of Martians occupied the center of our discussions then, being of personal and collective significance to us. It was of interest to me, personally, because it was rumored that an expedition of aliens would visit the Earth when peace reigned on our planet, and my mother needed this kind of peace even more than she needed my friend Paz.

"If the Martians come, I hope they take me with them," my mother said in an unforgettably solemn tone.

"You'd really take off, just like that, and leave me behind?" I asked anxiously.

Her response mingled tenderness, disillusionment, lethargy, and curiosity. It was then that I learned of the coincidence between my birth and the first photographs from deep space of the planet Mars, which she showed me.

"I've always wondered what's up there in the sky, what the worlds beyond ours are like. But no, honey, I wouldn't leave you."

Her answer calmed me, partially, but deep down I knew that her desire to leave this world was not fleeting, and that she really wanted to know if the peace she so desired might be found in another world.

I met Ángel Márquez in person at Paz's mother's funeral. Paz and I were in college by then, and her mother's plumpness had escalated into morbid obesity. Her coffin had to be special-ordered, triple the size of the average one, to fit her entire body. Her husband, the judo instructor, looked much the same as in the photos in their family home, only smaller and thinner. I laughed at my childish presumption that Ángel Márquez, in reality so little, could have beaten up my father, big and tough both in my eyes and in reality. But my parents were already divorced by then. My mother had stopped taking pills, and it seemed that part of her inner turmoil had subsided. Apparently much of her battle was fought against my father and on his account: The love that was supposed to bring her happiness left her with two daughters and the agitation of a man who was habitually unfaithful.

Outer space and its inhabitants came back to my attention the day I heard my mother, an elderly woman but not yet senile, say that she had dreamed of and believed that she had seen Martians. People eventually find what they want if they are persistent, and my mother had spoken about extraterrestrials all her life; or it was just the beginning of the decline of her mental capacities; or had life finally given her what she had wished for so long? My older sister, we were both older by then, grimaced when I told her what our mother had said. Neither of us knew what to think, but Paz, who knew her almost as well as we did and had the advantage of not being bound to her by blood, talked about the possibility that my mother's visions were real: real to her, at least. Fortunately, my mother showed no other signs of madness at that stage.

1999 came around and talk revolved around the new millennium and the possibility of the end of the world. Theories emerged from everywhere: In some, there was extreme fear; in others, extreme hope. The minority professed that the world would continue as it always had, while growing increasingly sophisticated. When the new millennium came with more of a whimper than a bang, the more radical theories vanished without a trace. My mother never made another comment to her daughters about the Martians, but Paz and she had long conversations about it. I neglected to mention that Paz was an avid believer in life on other worlds and in the exchange of information between them. She gleaned this from her readings rather than from experience.

It seemed normal that Paz sought out my mother more often in the wake of her mother's death; we shared the privilege of receiving my mother's love and in some ways the responsibility of caring for her as she aged. In fact, Paz probably would have moved in with her had my mother lived out the full course of her life. But what happened then, years after the new millennium, has no logical explanation; neither the police nor detectives nor clairvoyants have been able to give a reasonable account of it. One day I tried to call Paz, but she did not answer her home or cell phone. When I contacted my mother about it, she explained that Paz was going through a very hard time and had gone to her for solace. She had not mentioned anything because she did not want to alarm me. When I got there I expected to see my friend distraught and in tears, but she seemed in perfect mental health. There were books and magazines on UFOs strewn about and I arrived when they were about to watch a video on the topic. The documentary was intriguing, but I watched it with some trepidation because I was more concerned about what was happening between the two of them rather than those creatures with the huge eyes and heads. But there were no apparent clues.

"We're fine," Paz said when we embraced as I left.

I telephoned my older sister, who was beginning to act like my younger one.

"You handle it; she's your friend." And she hung up.

There was nothing wrong with them spending some quality time together, I told myself; perhaps my worrisome mind was overreacting. As a matter of fact, it was refreshing to know that my mother had someone to keep her company during the day. That is what I told myself, at least, until one afternoon no one answered the phone, no one came to the door,

and when I went inside I found everything in perfect order with a letter addressed to my sister and me on the living room table. I did not dare open it until my sister arrived. In brief, they wrote that with mutually reinforced courage they managed to communicate with the aliens, who had agreed to take them along so long as they agreed never to return to Earth. They expressed their love to everyone in their farewell statement, and with morbid humor they pointed out that at least they had saved us the expense and strain of a funeral. In the letter, Paz requested that her father be informed of her whereabouts, as if that were within the realm of possibility. We called my father and Ángel Márquez and together we examined the letter, raising questions and venturing conjectures. We called the police, a detective, and a clairvoyant, in that order, following their disappearance. No one could proffer an answer, and a full three years later we still have no explanation other than the contents of the letter. That document has driven a wedge between my sister and me and we never even see each other anymore unless it is to meet my father for dinner.

Sometimes I believe that my mother finally found peace in a world beyond our own; other times I fear that she and Paz were kidnapped and are being kept as slaves—that is, if they were not already tortured, raped, and murdered. The other morning, when I stepped out to pick up the newspaper, I noticed that the headlines referred to Mars with full-color photographs accompanying the feature story. New lenses and more precise instruments revealed figural patterns reminiscent of a human face on the surface of the planet. Some maintain that they are artifacts of an ancient civilization, but I find a striking resemblance to my mother in them.

—For my sister

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Edmée Pardo is the author of many novels and collections, including *The Blue Voice* and *Sickness is Written With a C.* She is a founding member of the independent publishing house Brujas and founding partner of Amati (a literature workshop space). She is an experienced journalist and is a commentator on the "Abra Palabra" program. She teaches at Amati and La Casa Universitaria del Libro. Her website is edmeepardo.com.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

A longtime bibliophile, Lesly Betancourt-Gonzalez had the opportunity to work on translating stories during an internship focused on helping immigrant farmworkers. Born in Baja California, Mexico, she was raised by immigrant parents in Reno, Nevada. She went on to graduate from Cornell University in 2011 and to work for the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute (CHCI) in Washington DC. After her stint with the CHCI, she made a sharp left turn and went on to pursue a second degree in engineering. When not tinkering with geological models, Lesly spends her time reading and rockhounding for minerals in the Nevada desert.

Empire Star

Samuel R. Delany | 25,800 words

one

He had:

a waist-length braid of blond hair;

a body that was brown and slim and looked like a cat's, they said, when he curled up, half-asleep, in the flicker of the Field Keeper's fire at New Cycle;

an ocarina;

a pair of black boots and a pair of black gloves with which he could climb walls and across ceilings;

gray eyes too large for his small, feral face;

brass claws on his left hand with which he had killed, to date, three wild kepards that had crept through a break in the power fence during his watch at New Cycle (and in a fight once with Billy James—a friendly scuffle where a blow had suddenly come too fast and too hard and turned it into for real—he had killed the other boy; but that had been two years ago when he had been sixteen, and he didn't like to think about it);

eighteen years of rough life in the caves of the satellite Rhys attending the underground fields while Rhys cycloided about the red giant Tau Ceti;

a propensity for wandering away from the Home Caves to look at the stars, which had gotten him in trouble at least four times in the past month, and in the past fourteen years had earned him the sobriquet, Comet Jo;

an uncle named Clemence whom he disliked.

Later, when he had lost all but, miraculously, the ocarina, he thought about these things and what they had meant to him, and how much they defined his youth, and how poorly they had prepared him for maturity.

Before he began to lose, however, he gained: two things, which, along with the ocarina, he kept until the end. One was a devil kitten named Di'k. The other was me. I'm Jewel.

I have a multiplex consciousness, which means I see things from different points of view. It's a function of the overtone series in the harmonic pattern of my internal structuring. So I'll tell a good deal of the story from the point of view called, in literary circles, the omniscient observer.

• • • •

Crimson Ceti bruised the western crags. Tyre, giant as solar Jupiter, was a black curve across a quarter of the sky, and the white dwarf Eye silvered the eastern rocks. Comet Jo, with hair the hue of wheat, walked behind his two shadows, one long and gray, one squat and rusty. His head was back, and in the rush of wine-colored evening he stared at the

first stars. In his long-fingered right hand, with the nails gnawed like any boy might, he held his ocarina. He should go back, he knew; he should crawl from under the night and into the luminous cocoon of the Home Cave. He should be respectful to his Uncle Clemence; he should not get into fights with the other boys on Field Watch. There were so many things he should do—

A sound:

Rock and non-rock in conflict.

He crouched, and his clawed left hand, deadly on the lean arm, jumped to protect his face. Kepards struck for the eyes. But it was not a kepard. He lowered his claw.

The devil-kitten came scrambling from the crevice, balancing on five of its eight legs, and hissed. It was a foot long, had three horns, and large gray eyes the color of Jo's own. It giggled, which devil-kittens do when upset, usually because they have lost their devil-cat parents—which are fifty feet long and perfectly harmless, unless they step on you accidentally.

"Wha' madda?" Comet Jo asked. "Ya ma and pa run off?"

The devil-kitten giggled again.

"Sum' wrong?" Jo persisted.

The kitten looked over its left shoulder and hissed.

"Le' ta' look." Comet Jo nodded. "Com'n, kitty." Frowning, he started forward, the motion of his naked body over the rocks as graceful as his speech was rude. He dropped from a ledge to crumbling red earth, yellow hair clouding his shoulders in mid-leap, then falling in his eyes. He shook it back. The kitten rubbed his ankle, giggled again, and darted around the boulder.

Jo followed—then threw himself back against the rock. The claws of his left hand and the nubs of his right ground on the granite. He sweated. The large vein along the side of his throat pulsed furiously, while his scrotum tightened like a prune.

Green slop frothed and flamed in a geyser two feet taller than Jo was. There were things in that fuming mess he couldn't see, but he could sense them—writhing, shrieking silently, dying in great pain. One of the things was trying hard to struggle free.

Oblivious to the agony within, the devil-kitten pranced to the base, spat haughtily, and pranced back.

As Jo chanced a breath, the thing inside broke out. It staggered forward, smoking. It raised gray eyes. Long wheat-colored hair caught on a breeze and blew back from its shoulders, as, for a moment, it moved with a certain catlike grace. Then it fell forward.

Something under fear made Comet Jo reach out and catch its extended arms. Hand caught claw. Claw caught hand. It was only when Comet Jo was kneeling and the figure was panting in his arms that he realized it was his double.

Surprise exploded in his head, and his tongue was one of the things jarred loose. "Who you?"

"You've got to take . . ." the figure began, coughed, and for a moment its features lost clarity: ". . . to take . . ." it repeated.

"Wha'? *Wha'?"* Jo was baffled and scared.

". . . take a message to Empire Star." The accent was the clean, precise tone of off-worlders' Interling. "You have to take a message to Empire Star!"

"Wha' I say?"

"Just get there and tell them . . ." It coughed again. "Just get there . . . no matter how long it . . ."

"Wha' hell I say when I ge' there?" Jo demanded. Then he thought of all the things he should have already asked. "Whe' ya fum? Whe' ya go? Wha' happen?"

Struck by a spasm, the figure arched its back and flipped from Jo's arms. Comet Jo reached out to pry the mouth open and keep it from swallowing its tongue, but before he touched it, it . . . melted.

It bubbled and steamed, frothed and smoked.

The larger phenomenon had quieted down, was only a puddle now, sloshing the weeds. The devil-kitten went to the edge, sniffed, then pawed something out. The puddle stilled, then began to evaporate—fast. The kitten picked the thing up in its mouth and, blinking rapidly, came and laid it between Jo's knees, then sat back to wash its fluffy pink chest.

Jo looked down.

The thing was multicolored, multifaceted, multiplexed, and me.

I'm Jewel.

two

Oh, we had traveled so long, Norn, Ki, Marbika, and myself, to have it end so suddenly and disastrously. I had warned them, of course, when our original ship had broken down and we had taken the organiform cruiser from S. Doradus. Things went beautifully as long as we stayed in the comparatively dusty region of the Magellanic Cloud, but when we reached the emptier space of the Home Spiral, there was nothing for the encysting mechanism to catalyze against.

We were going to swing around Ceti and head for Empire Star with our burden of good news and bad, our chronicle of success and defeat. But we lost our crust, and the organiform, like a wild amoeba, plopped onto the satellite Rhys. The strain was fatal. Ki was dead when we landed. Marbika had broken up into a hundred idiot components, which were struggling and dying in the nutrient jelly, where we were suspended.

Norn and I had a quick consultation. We put a rather faulty perceptor scan over a hundred-mile radius from the crash. The organiform had already started to destroy itself. Its primitive intelligence blamed us for the accident, and it wanted to kill. The perceptor scan showed a small colony of Terrans, who worked producing plyasil, which grew in the vast underground caves. There was a small Transport Station about twenty miles south where the plyasil was shipped to Galactic-Center to be distributed among the stars. But the satellite itself was incredibly backward. "This is about as simplex a community as

I've ever run into that you could still call intelligent," Norn commented. "I can't detect more than ten minds in the whole place that have ever been to another star-system; and *they* all work at the Transport Station."

"Where they have nonorganic, reliable ships that won't get hostile and crack up," I said. "Because of this one we've both got to die, and we'll never get to Empire Star now. That's the sort of ship we should have been on. This thing—bah!" The temperature of the proto-photoplasm was getting uncomfortable.

"There's a child somewhere around here," Norn said. "And a . . . what the hell is that, anyway?"

"The Terrans call it a devil-kitten," I said, picking up the information.

"That certainly isn't a simplex mind."

"It's not exactly multiplex either," I said. "But it's something. Maybe it could get the message through."

"But its intelligence is sub-moronic," Norn said. "The Terrans at least have a fair amount of gray matter. If we could only get the both of them cooperating. That child is rather bright—but so simplex! The kitten is complex, at least—so at least it could carry the message. Well, let's try. See if you can get them over here. If you crystallize, you can put off dying for a while, can't you?"

"Yes," I said, uncomfortably, "but I don't know if I want to. I don't think I can take being that passive, being just a point of view."

"Even passive," Norn said, "you can be very useful, especially to that simplex boy. He's going to have a hard time, if he agrees."

"Oh, all right," I said. "I'll crystallize. But I won't like it. You go on out and see what you can do."

"Damn," Norn said, "I don't like dying. I don't want to die. I want to live, and go to Empire Star and tell them."

"Hurry up," I said. "You're wasting time."

"All right, all right. What form do you think I should take?"

"Remember, you're dealing with a simplex mind. There's only one form you can take that he's likely to pay much attention to and not chalk up to a bad dream tomorrow morning."

"All right," Norn repeated. "Here goes. Good-bye, Jewel."

"Good-bye," I said and began to crystallize.

Norn struggled forward, and the boiling jelly sagged as he broke through onto the rocks where the child was waiting. *Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,* I projected toward the devil-kitten. It was very cooperative.

three

Comet Jo walked back to the caves, playing slow tunes on the ocarina, and thinking. The gem (which was Jewel, which was me) hung in the pouch at his waist. The devil-

kitten was snapping at fireflies, then stopping to pick bristles out of its foot cups. Once it rolled on its back and hissed at a star; then it scurried after Comet. It was not a simplex mind at all.

Comet reached the ledge of Toothsome. Glancing over the rock, he saw Uncle Clemence at the door of the cave, looking very annoyed. Comet stuck his tongue in his cheek and hunted for leftover lunch, because he knew he wasn't going to get any dinner.

Above him someone said, "Hey, stupid! Unca' Clem is mad on y', an' how!"

He looked up. His fourth cousin Lilly was hanging onto the edge of a higher precipice, staring down.

He motioned, and she came down to stand beside him. Her hair was cut in a short brush, which he always envied girls. "Tha' ya' devil-kitty? Wha's's name?"

"It ain't none o' mine," he said. "Hey, who says ya can use my boots and gloves, huh?"

She was wearing the knee-high black boots and the elbow-length gloves that Charona had given him for his twelfth birthday.

"I wanted to wait for ya an' tell ya how mad Unca' Clem is. An' I had to hang up there whe' I could see ya comin' in."

"Jhup, ya did! Gimme. Ya jus' wan'ed to use 'em. Now gimme. I di'n' say ya could use 'em."

Reluctantly Lilly shucked the gloves. "Jhup ya," she said. "Ya won' lemme use 'em?" She stepped out of the boots.

"No," Comet said.

"All right," Lilly said. She turned around and called, *"Unca' Clem!"*

"Hey . . . !" Jo said.

"Unca' Clem, Comet's back!"

"Shedup!" Comet hissed, then turned and ran back across the ledge.

"Unca' Clem, he's runnin' away again—" Just then the devil-kitty stuck two of its horns into Lilly's ankles, picked up the gloves and boots in his mouth, and ran after Comet —which was a very multiplex thing to do, considering no one had said anything to him at all.

Fifteen minutes later Comet was crouching in the starlit rocks, scared and mad. Which was when the devil-kitty walked up and dropped the boots and gloves in front of him.

"Huh?" said Comet, as he recognized them in the maroon half-dark. "Hey, thanks!" And he picked them up and put them on. "Charona," he said, standing up. "I'm gonna go see Charona." Because Charona had given him the boots, and because Charona was never mad at him, and because Charona would be likely to know what Empire Star was.

He started off, then turned back and frowned at the devil-kitten. Devil-kittens are notoriously independent, and do not fetch and carry for human beings like dogs. "Devil-kitty," he said. "D'kitty. Di'k; that's a name. Di'k, you wanna come wi' me?" which was a surprisingly un-simplex thing to do—anyway, it surprised me.

Comet Jo started off. Di'k followed.

• • • •

It rained toward dawn. The spray drooled his face and jeweled his eyelashes as he hung from the underside of the cliff, looking down at the gate of the Transport Area. He hung like a sloth. Di'k sat in the cradle of his belly.

Between the rocks in the reddening light, two plyasil trucks crept forward. In a minute Charona would come to let them in. Leaning his head back until the world was upside down, he could see across the rocky valley, spanned by the double cusp of Brooklyn Bridge, to the loading platforms where the star ships balanced in the dawn's red rain.

As the trucks came out of the thicket of chupper vines that at one point arbored the road, he saw Charona marching toward the gate. 3-Dog ran ahead of her, barking through the mesh at the vehicles as they halted. The devil-kitten shifted nervously from one foot to another. One way in which it resembled its namesake was its dislike for dogs.

Charona pulled the gate lever, and the bars rolled back. As the truck trundled through, Jo hollered down from the cliff, "Hey, Charona, hol' 'em up f'me!"

She lifted her bald head and twisted her wrinkled face. "Who art thou aloft?"

3-Dog barked.

"Watch it," Jo called, then let go of the rocks and twisted in the air. He and Di'k both took the fall rolling. He sprang open before her, light on his booted feet.

"Well!" she laughed, putting her fists in the pouch of her silver skin suit that glistened with rain. "Thou art an agile elf. Where has thou been a-hiding for the best part of the month?"

"The New Cycle watch," he said, grinning. "See, I'm wearin' ya' present."

"And it's good to see thee with them. Come in, come in, so I can close the gate."

Comet ducked under the half-lowered bars. "Hey, Charona," he said as they started down the wet road together, "wh' Empire Star? An' whe' it? An' how I ge' 'ere?" By unspoken consent they turned off the road to make their way over the rougher earth of the valley beneath the tongue of metal called Brooklyn Bridge.

"'Tis a great, great star, lad, that thy great-great-great-grandfathers on Earth called Aurigae. It is seventy-two degrees around the hub of the galaxy from here at a hyperstatic distance of fifty-five point nine, and—to quote the ancient maxim—thou canst not get there from here."

"Why?"

Charona laughed. 3-Dog ran ahead and barked at Di'k, who arched, started to say something back in kittenish, thought better of it, and pranced away. "One could hitch a ride on a transport and get started; but *thou* couldst not. Which is the important part."

Comet Jo frowned.

"Why cou'nt I?" He swiped at a weed and tore off the head. "I gonna ge' off this planet —now!"

Charona raised the bare flesh where her eyebrows would have been. "Thou seemst a mite determined. Thou art the first person born here to tell me that in four hundred years.

Return thou, Comet Jo, to thine uncle and make peace in the Home Cave."

"Jhup," said Comet Jo and kicked a small stone. "I wanna go. Why can' I go?"

"Simplex, complex, and multiplex," Charona said. And I woke up in the pouch. Perhaps there was hope, after all. If there was someone to explain it to him, the journey would be easier. "This is a simplex society here, Comet. Space travel is not a part of it. Save for trucking the plyasil here, and a few curious children like thyself, nobody ever comes inside the gates. And in a year, thou wilt cease to come, and all thy visits will eventually mean to thee is that thou wilt be a bit more lenient with thine own when they will wander to the gates or come back to the Home Caves with magic trinkets from the stars. To travel between worlds, one must deal with at least complex beings, and often multiplex. Thou wouldst be lost as how to conduct thyself. After half an hour in a spaceship, thou wouldst turn around and decide to go back, dismissing the whole idea as foolish. The fact that thou hast a simplex mind is good, in a way, because thou remainest safe at Rhys. And even though thou comest through the gates, thou art not likely to be 'corrupted,' as it were, even by visits to the Transport Area, nor by an occasional exposure to something from the stars, like those boots and gloves I gave thee."

She seemed to have finished, and I felt sad, for that certainly was no explanation. And by now I knew that Jo would journey.

But Comet reached for his pouch, pushed aside the ocarina, and lifted me out into the palm of his hand. "Charona, ya ever see wonna these?"

Together they loomed above me. Beyond the tines of Comet's claws, beyond their shadowed faces, the black ribbon of Brooklyn Bridge scribed the mauve sky. His palm was warm beneath my dorsal facet. A cool droplet splashed my frontal faces, distorting theirs.

"Why . . . I think . . . No, it cannot be. Where didst thou retrieve it?"

He shrugged. "Jus' foun' it. Wha'cha think it is?"

"It looks for all the light of the seven suns to be a crystallized Tritovian."

She was right, of course, and I knew immediately that here was a well-traveled spacewoman. Crystallized, we Tritovians are not that common.

"Gotta take him to Empire Star."

Charona thought quietly behind the wrinkled mask of her face, and I could tell from the overtones that they were multiplex thoughts, with images of space and the stars seen in the blackness of galactic night, weird landscapes that were unfamiliar even to me. The four hundred years as gate guardian to the Transport Area of Rhys had leveled her mind to something nearly simplex. But multiplexity had awakened.

"I shall try and explain something to thee, Comet. Tell me, what's the most important thing there is?"

"Jhup," he answered promptly, then saw her frowning. He got embarrassed. "I mean plyasil. I din' mean to use no dirty words." And I was dropped back in his pouch.

"Words don't bother me, Comet. In fact, I always found it a little funny that thy people had such a thing as a 'dirty word' for plyasil. Though I suppose 'tis not so funny when I

recall the 'dirty words' on the world I came from. Water was the taboo term where I grew up—there was very little of it, and thou dared not refer to it by other than its chemical formula in a technological discussion, and never in front of your teacher. And on Earth, in our great-great-grandfather's time, food once eaten and passed from the body could not be spoken of by its common name in polite company."

"But wha' dirty about food an' water?"

"What's dirty about jhup?"

He was surprised at her use of the common slang. But she was always dealing with truckers and loaders who had notoriously filthy mouths and lacked respect for everything —said Uncle Clemence.

"I dunno."

"It's an organic plastic that grows in the flower of a mutant strain of grain that only blooms with the radiation that comes from the heart of Rhys in the darkness of the caves. It's of no use to anyone on this planet, except as an alloy strengthener for other plastics, and yet it is Rhys' only purpose in the Universal plan—to supply the rest of the galaxy. For there are places where it is needed. All men and women on Rhys work to produce or process or transport it. That is all it is. Nowhere in my definition have I mentioned anything about dirt."

"Well, if a bag of it breaks open and spills, it's sort of . . . well, not dirty, but messy."

"Spilled water or spilled food is messy too. But none of them by nature so."

"You just don' talk about certain things in front o' nice people. That's what Unca' Clem says." Jo finally took refuge in his training. "An' like ya say, jhup is the most important thing there is, so that's why you have to . . . well, be a little respectful."

"I didn't say it. You did. And that is why thou hast a simplex mind. If thou passeth through the second gate and asketh a ride of a Transport captain—and thou wilt probably get it, for they are a good lot—thou wilt be in a different world, where plyasil means only forty credits a ton and is a good deal less important than derny, kibblepobs, clapper boxes, or boysh, all of which bring above fifty. And thou might shout the name of any of them, and be thought nothing more than noisy."

"I ain't gonna go shoutin' nothing aroun'," Comet Jo assured her. "An' all I can get from ya' jabber about 'simplex' is that I know how to be polite, even if a lotta other people don'—I know I'm not as polite as I should be, but I do know how."

Charona laughed. 3-Dog ran back and rubbed her hip with his head.

"Perhaps I can explain it in purely metaphorical terms, though painfully I know that thou wilt not understand until thou hast seen for thyself. Stop and look above."

They paused in the broken stone and looked up.

"See the holes?" she asked.

In the plating that floored the bridge, here and there were pinpricks of light.

"They just look like random dots, do they not?"

He nodded.

"That's the simplex view. Now start walking and keep looking."

Comet started to walk, steadily, staring upward. The dots of light winked out, and here and there others appeared, then winked out again, and more, or perhaps the original ones, returned.

"There's a superstructure of girders above the bridge that gets in the way of some of the holes and keeps thee from perceiving all at once. But thou art now receiving the complex view, for thou art aware that there is more than what is seen from any one spot. Now, start to run, and keep thy head up."

Jo began to run along the rocks. The rate of flickering increased, and suddenly he realized that the holes were in a pattern, six-pointed stars crossed by diagonals of seven holes each. It was only with the flickering coming so fast that the entire pattern could be perceived—

He stumbled, and skidded onto his hands and knees.

"Didst thou see the pattern?"

"Eh . . . yeah." Jo shook his head. His palms stung through the gloves, and one knee was raw.

"That was the multiplex view."

3-Dog bent down and licked his face.

Di'k watched a little scornfully from the fork of a trident bush.

"Thou hast also encountered one of the major difficulties of the simplex mind attempting to encompass the multiplex view. Thou art very likely to fall flat on thy face. I really do not know if thou wilt make the transition, though thou art young, and older people than thou have had to harken. Certainly I wish thee luck. Though for the first few legs of thy journey, thou canst always turn around and come back, and even with a short hop to Ratshole thou wilt have seen a good deal more of the universe than most of the people of Rhys. But the farther thou goest, the harder it will be to return."

Comet Jo pushed 3-Dog aside and stood up. His next question came both from fear of his endeavor and the pain in his hands. "Brooklyn Bridge," he said, still looking up. "Why they call it Brooklyn Bridge?" He asked it as one asks a question without an answer, and had his mind been precise enough to articulate its true meaning, he would have asked, "Why is that structure there to trip me up at all?"

But Charona was saying, "On Earth, there is a structure similar to this that spans between two islands—though it is a little smaller than this one here. 'Bridge' is the name for this sort of structure, and Brooklyn is the name of the place it leads to, so it was called Brooklyn Bridge. The first colonists brought the name with them and gave it to what thou seest here."

"Ya mean there's a reason?"

Charona nodded.

Suddenly an idea caught in his head, swerved around a corner, and came up banging and clanging behind his ears. "Will I get to see Earth?"

"'Twill not take thee too far afield," Charona said.

"And c'n I see Brooklyn Bridge?" His feet had started to move in the boots.

"I saw it four hundred years ago, and 'twas still standing then."

Comet Jo suddenly jumped up and tried to beat his fists against the sky, which was a beautifully complex action that gave me more hope; then he ran forward, leaped against one of the stanchions of the bridge and, from sheer exuberance, scurried up a hundred feet of thermoplast.

Stopping at two girders' groin, he looked down. "Hey, Charona! I'm gonna go Earth! Me, Comet Jo, I'm gonna go Earth an' see Brooklyn Bridge!"

Below us the gatekeeper smiled and stroked 3-Dog's head.

four

They came up from beneath the balustrade as the rain ceased. Climbing over the railing, they strolled across the water-blackened tarmac toward the second gate. "Thou art sure?" Charona asked him once more.

A little warily, he nodded.

"And what should I say to thy Uncle when he comes inquiring, which he will."

At the thought of Uncle Clemence, the wariness increased. "Jus' say I gone away."

Charona nodded, pulled the second lever, and the gate rose.

"And wilt thou be taking that?" Charona pointed to Di'k.

"Sure. Why not?" And at that he strode bravely forward. Di'k looked right, left, then ran after him. Charona would have gone through herself to accompany the boy, but suddenly there was a signal light flashing, which said her presence was required at the first gate again. So only her gaze went with him, as the gate lowered. Then she turned back, this time across the bridge.

He had never done more than look through the second gate at the bulbous forms of the ships, at the loading buildings, at the mechanical loaders and sledges that plied the pathways of the Transport Area. When he stepped through, he looked around, waiting for the world to be very different, as Charona had warned. But his conception of *different* was rather simplex, so that twenty feet along he was disappointed.

Another twenty feet and disappointment was replaced by ordinary curiosity. A saucer-sled was sliding toward him, and a tall figure guided it austerely down the slip. There was a small explosion of fear and surprise when he realized the saucer was coming directly at him. A moment later it stopped.

The woman standing there—and it took him a minute to figure it out, for her hair was long like a man's and elaborately coiffed like no one's he'd ever seen—wore a glittering red dress, where panels of different textures (though the color was all the same) wrapped her or swung away in the damp dawn breeze. Her hair and lips and nails were red, he realized. That *was* odd. She looked down at him, and said, "You are a beautiful boy."

"Wha'?" asked Comet.

"I said you are a beautiful boy."

"Well, jhup, I mean . . . well . . ." Then he stopped looking at his feet and stared back

up at her.

"But your hair is a mess."

He frowned. "Whaddya mean it's a mess?"

"I mean exactly what I say. And *where* did you learn to speak Interling? Or am I just getting a foggy telepathic equivalent of your oral utterance?"

"Wha'?"

"Never mind. You are still a beautiful boy. I will give you a comb, and I will give you diction lessons. Come to me on the ship—you *will* be taking my ship, since there is no other one leaving soon. Ask for San Severina."

The saucer-disk turned to slide away.

"Hey, whe'ya goin'?" Comet Jo called.

"Comb your hair first, and we shall discuss it at lessons." She removed something from a panel of her dress and tossed it to him.

He caught it, looked at it. It was a red comb.

He pulled his mass of hair across his shoulder for inspection. It was snarled from the night's journey to the Transport Area. He struck at it a few times, hoping that perhaps the comb was some special type that would make unsnarling easier. It wasn't. So it took him about ten minutes, and then, to avoid repeating the ordeal as long as possible, he braided it deftly down one shoulder. Then he put the comb to his pouch and took out the ocarina.

He was passing a pile of cargo when he saw a young man a few years his senior perched on top of the boxes, hugging his knees and staring down at him. He was barefooted, shirtless, and his frayed pants were held on by rope. His hair was of some indiscriminately sexless length and a good deal more snarled than Jo's had been. He was very dirty, but he was grinning.

"Hey!" Jo said. "Know where I can getta ride outta here?"

"T'chapubna," the boy said, pointing across the field, "f'd jhup n' Lll."

Jo felt a little lost that the only thing he understood in the sentence was a swear word.

"I wanna get a ride," Jo repeated.

"T'chapubna," the boy said, and pointed again. Then he put his hands to his mouth as though he too were playing an ocarina.

"You wanna try?" Jo asked and then wished he hadn't, because the boy was so dirty.

But the boy shook his head, smiling. "Jus' a shuttle-bum. Can' make no music."

Which half made sense, maybe. "Where ya from?" Jo asked.

"Jus' a shuttle-bum," the boy repeated. Now he pointed to the pink moon-moon above the horizon. "Dere n' back, dere n' back, 'sall I ever been." He smiled again.

"Oh," Jo said, and smiled because he couldn't think of anything else to do. He wasn't sure if he'd gotten any information from the conversation or not. He started playing the ocarina again and kept walking.

He headed directly for a ship this time: the one being loaded.

Jo crossed what seemed acres of tarmac.

A beefy man was supervising the robo-loaders, checking things off against a list. His

greasy shirt was still damp from the rain, and he had tied it across his hairy stomach, which bulged below and above the knot.

Another boy, this one closer to Jo's age, was leaning against a guy cable that ran from the ship. Like the first, he was dirty, shoeless, and shirtless. One pant leg was torn off at the knee, and two belt loops were held together with a twist of wire. The weatherburned face even lacked the readiness to smile that the other's held. The boy leaned out from the guy and swung his body slowly around, to watch Jo as he came past.

Jo started to approach the big man checking the loading, but the man had gotten very busy reorganizing the pile that one of the loaders had done incorrectly, so Jo stepped back. He looked at the boy again, gave a half-smile and nodded. Comet didn't feel much like getting into a conversation, but the boy nodded shortly back, and the man looked like he was going to be busy for a while.

"Ya a shuttle-bum?" Jo asked.

The boy nodded.

"Ya go from there n' back?" he asked, pointing toward the disk of the moon-moon.

The boy nodded again.

"Any chance my hoppin' a ride out toward . . . well, anywhere?"

"There is if you want to take a job," the boy said.

The accent surprised Jo.

"Sure," Jo said. "If I gotta work, I don't mind."

The boy pulled himself upright on the wire. "Hey, Elmer," he called. The man looked back, then flipped a switch on his wrist-console, and the robo-loaders all halted. *That was simple,* Jo thought.

"What dost thou wish?" Elmer asked, turning around and wiping his forehead.

"We have that second shuttle-bum. The kid wants a job."

"Well and good," Elmer said. "Thou wilt take care of him, then. He looks a likely lad, but feed him well and he'll work, I warrant." He grinned and turned back to the robo-loaders.

"You're hired," the boy said. "My name's Ron."

"I'm Jo," Jo said. "They call me Comet Jo."

Ron laughed out loud and shook Jo's hand. "I'll never figure it. I've been running the stasiscurrents for six months now, and every tried and true spaceman you meet is Bob or Hank or Elmer. Then, the minute you hit some darkside planet or one-product simplex culture, everybody's Starman, or Cosmic Smith, or Comet Jo." He clapped Jo on the shoulder. "Don't take offense, but thou wilt lose thy 'comet' soon enough."

Jo took no offense, mainly because he wasn't sure what Ron was talking about, but he smiled. "Whe' ya from?"

"I'm taking a year off from Centauri University to bounce around the stars, work a little when I have to. I've been shuttle-bumming across this quarter of the spiral for a couple of months. You notice Elmer here's got me talking like a real spaceman?"

"That guy sittin' back there? He from the . . . University too?"

"Hank? That darkside, noplex kid who was sitting on the cargo?" Ron laughed.

"Noplex?" Jo asked. He connected the word to the others he had learned that morning. "Like simplex, complex, and that stuff?"

Ron apparently realized that the query was serious. "There's no such thing as noplex, really. But sometimes you wonder. Hank just bums between Rhys and moon-moon. His folks are h-poor, and I don't even think he can read and write his name. Most shuttle-bums come from similar situations, thou wilt discover. They just have their one run, usually between two planets, and that's all they'll ever see. But I star hop too. I want to make mate's position before the Half Spin is over, so I can go back to school with some money, but thou must begin somewhere. How far are you going?"

"Empire Star," Jo said. "Do ya . . . I mean doest thou know whe' it is?"

"Trying to pick up a spaceman's accent already?" Ron asked. "Don't worry, it'll rub off on you before you know. Empire Star? I guess it's about seventy, seventy-five degrees around galactic center."

"Seventy-two degrees, at a distance of 55.9," Jo said.

"Then why did you ask me?" Ron said.

"'Cause that don' tell me nothin'."

Ron laughed again. "Oh. I see. Thou hast never been in space before?"

Jo shook his head.

"I see," repeated Ron, and the laugh got louder. "Well, it will mean something shortly. Believe thou me, it will!" Then Ron saw Di'k. "Is that yours?"

Jo nodded. "I can take him wi' me, can' I?"

"Elmer's the Captain. Ask him."

Jo looked at the Captain, who was furiously rearranging a cargo pile to balance on the loader. "All right," he said, and started toward him. "Elm—"

Ron grabbed his shoulder. Jo swung around. "Wha'? Jhup—"

"Not now, noplex! Wait till he's finished."

"But you just—"

"You're not me," Ron explained, "and he wasn't trying to balance the load when I stopped him. If you call him by his name, he has to stop, and you might have killed him if that load fell over."

"Oh. Wha' should I call him?"

"Try 'Captain,'" Ron said. "That's what he is, and when you call him that, he doesn't have to stop what he's doing unless it's convenient. Only call him Elmer if it's an emergency." He looked sideways at Jo. "On second thought, let somebody else decide if it's an emergency or not. To you he's 'Captain' until he tells you otherwise."

"Was it an emergency when you called him?"

"He wanted another shuttle-bum for this trip, but I also saw that he wasn't doing anything he couldn't stop, and . . . well, you've just got a lot to learn."

Jo looked crestfallen.

"Cheer up," Ron said. "You do nice things on the sweet potato there. I have a guitar

inside—I'll get it out, and we can play together, hey?" He grabbed hold of the guy line and started to climb hand over hand. He disappeared into the overhanging hatch. Jo watched, wide-eyed. Ron wasn't even wearing gloves.

Just then Captain Elmer said, "Hey, thou canst take thy kitten, but thou must leave those gloves and boots."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I say so. Ron?"

The shuttle-bum looked out of the hatch. "What?" He was holding a guitar.

"Explain to him about culture-banned artifacts."

"Okay," Ron said, and slid down the guy wire again with his feet and one hand. "You better chuck those now."

Reluctantly Jo began to peel them from his hands and feet.

"You see, we're going to be running to some complex cultures, with a technology a lot below the technology that made those boots. If they got out, it might disrupt their whole culture."

"We couldn't make them boots," Jo said, "and Charona gave . . . 'em to me."

"That's because you're simplex here. Nothing could disrupt *your* culture, short of moving it to another environment. And even then, you'd probably come up with the same one. But complex cultures are touchy. We're taking a load of jhup to Genesis. Then the Lll will go on to Ratshole. You can probably pick up a ride there to Earth if you want. I guess you want to see Earth. Everybody does."

Jo nodded.

"From Earth you can go anywhere. Maybe you'll even get a ride straight on to Empire Star. What do you have to go there for?"

"Gotta take a message."

"Yeah?" Ron began to tune the guitar.

Jo opened his pouch and took me out—I rather wished he wouldn't go showing me around to everyone. There were some people who would get rather upset if I showed up, crystallized or not.

"This," Jo said. "I gotta take this there."

Ron peered at me. "Oh, I see." He put the guitar down. "I guess it's good you're going with the shipment of Lll then."

I smiled to myself. Ron was a multiplexually educated young man. I shuddered to think what would have happened had Jo shown me to Hank; the other shuttle-bum would just as likely have tried to make Jo trade me for something or other, and that would have been disastrous.

"What's Lll?" Jo asked. "Is that one of the things more important than jhup?"

"Good lord, yes," Ron said. "You've never seen any, have you?"

Jo shook his head.

"Come on, then," said Ron. "We can play later. Up into the hatch with you, and throw your boots and gloves away."

Jo left them on the tarmac and began to climb the cable. It was easier than he'd anticipated, but he was sweating at the top. Di'k simply climbed up the ship's hull with his cupped feet and was waiting for him in the hatch.

Jo followed Ron down a hallway, down through another hatchway, down a short ladder. "The Lll are in here," Ron said before a circular door. He was still holding the guitar by the neck. He pushed open the door, and something grabbed Jo by the stomach and twisted. Tears mounted in his eyes, and his mouth opened. His breath began to come very slowly.

"Really hit you, didn't it?" Ron said, his voice soft. "Let's go inside."

Jo was scared, and when he stepped into the half-darkness, his gut fell twenty feet with each step. He blinked to clear his vision, but the tears came again.

"Those are the Lll," Ron said.

Jo saw tears on Ron's weathered face. He looked forward again.

They were chained by the wrists and ankles to the floor; seven of them, Jo counted. Their great green eyes blinked in the blue cargo light. Their backs were humped, their heads shaggy. Their bodies seemed immensely strong.

"What am I . . ." Jo tried to say, but something caught in his throat, and the sound rasped. "What am I feelin'?" he whispered, for it was as loud as he could speak.

"Sadness," Ron said.

Once named, the emotion grew recognizable—a vast, overpowering sadness that drained all movement from his muscles, all joy from his eyes.

"They make me feel . . . sad?" Jo asked. "Why?"

"They're slaves," Ron said. "They build—build beautifully, wonderfully. They're extremely valuable. They built over half the Empire. And the Empire protects them, this way."

"Protects . . . ?" Jo asked.

"You can't get near them without feeling like this."

"Then who would buy them?"

"Not many people. But enough so that they are incredibly valuable slaves."

"Why don't they turn 'em *loose?"* Jo asked, and the sentence became a cry halfway through.

"Economics," Ron said.

"How can ya think 'bout economics feelin' like . . . this?"

"Not many people can," Ron said. "That's the Lll's protection."

Jo knuckled his eyes. "Let's get outta here."

"Let's stay awhile," Ron countered. "We'll play for them now." He sat down on a crate, put his guitar on his lap, and pulled from it a modal chord. "Play," Ron said. "I'll follow you."

Jo began to blow, but his breath was so weak that the note quavered and died half-sung. "I . . . I don' wanna," Jo protested.

"It's your job, shuttle-bum," Ron said, simply. "You have to take care of the cargo

once it's aboard. They like music, and it will make them happy."

"Will it . . . make me happier too?" Jo asked.

Ron shook his head. "No."

Jo raised the ocarina to his mouth, filled his lungs, and blew. The long notes filled the hold of the ship, and as Jo closed his eyes, the tears melted the darkness behind his lids. Ron's obligato wove around the melody Jo coaxed from his ocarina. Each note took on a pungency like perfume and called up before Jo, as he played with eyes shut and streaming, the New Cycle when the plyasil had failed, the funeral of Billy James, the day that Lilly laughed at him when he had tried to kiss her behind the generator of the power fence, the time when the slaughtered kepards had been weighed and he had learned that his weighed ten pounds less than Yl Odic's—and Yl was three years his junior and everybody was always saying how wonderful she was—in short, every unhappy and painful memory of his simplex existence.

When they left the hold half an hour later and, as Ron secured the hatch, the feeling rolled from him like a receding wave, Jo felt exhausted; and he was quivering.

"Hard work, huh?" Ron said, smiling. Tears had streaked the dust on his face.

Jo didn't say anything, only tried to keep from sobbing in earnest with homesickness that still constricted his throat. *You can always turn around and go home,* Charona had said. He almost started to. But a voice over the loudspeaker said, "Will the Beautiful Boy please come for his Interling lesson."

"That's San Severina," Ron said. "She's our only passenger. The Lll belong to her."

An entire matrix of emotions broke open in Jo's head at once, among them outrage, fear, and curiosity. Curiosity won out.

"Her cabin's just up that way and around the corner," Ron said.

Jo started forward. How, he wondered, could she possibly bring herself to own those incredible creatures?

five

"A vast improvement," San Severina said when he opened her door. "I'm sure you're wondering how I could possibly bring myself to own those incredible creatures."

She sat in an opulent bubble chair, sheathed in blue from neck to ankles. Her hair, her lips, her nails were blue.

"It isn't easy."

Jo stepped inside. One wall was covered with crowded bookshelves.

"You, at least," San Severina went on, "only have to feel it when you are in their presence. I, as owner, am subjected to that feeling throughout the entire duration of my ownership. It is part of the contract."

"You feel that way . . . now?"

"Rather more intensely than you did just then. My sensitivity band is a good deal wider than yours."

"But . . . why?"

"It cannot be helped. I have eight worlds, fifty-two civilizations, and thirty-two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven complete and distinct ethical systems to rebuild. I cannot do it without Lll. Three of those worlds are charred black, without a drop of water on their surfaces. One is half-volcanic and must be completely recrusted. Another has lost a good deal of its atmosphere. The other three are at least habitable."

"Wha' happened?" Jo asked incredulously.

"War," said San Severina. "And it is so much more disastrous today than it was a thousand years back. Sixty-eight billion, five hundred thousand, two hundred and five people, reduced to twenty-seven. There was nothing to do but pool our remaining wealth and agree to purchase the Lll. I am bringing them back now, by way of Earth."

"Lll," Jo repeated. "Wha' *are* they?"

"Didn't you ask that other young man?"

"Yeah, but—"

San Severina's smile stopped him. "Ah, the seeds of complexity. When you receive one answer, you ask for a second. Very good. I will give you a second. They are the shame and tragedy of the multiplex universe. No man can be free until they are free. While they are bought and sold, any man may be bought and sold—if the price is high enough. Now come, it's time for your Interling lesson. Would you get me that book?"

Obedient but bewildered, Jo fetched the book from the desk.

"Why I gotta learn speakin'?" he asked as he handed it to her.

"So people can understand you. You have a long journey, at the end of which you must deliver a message, quite precisely, quite accurately. It would be disastrous if you were misheard."

"I don' even know wha' is it!" Jo said.

"You will by the time you deliver it," San Severina said. "But you'd best get to work now."

Jo looked at the book apprehensively. "You got somethin' I can maybe learn it real quick wi', in my sleep or sompin'—like hypnotizin'?" He recalled his disappointment with her comb.

"I have nothing like that with me now," San Severina said sadly. "I thought the other young man explained. We're passing through some rather primitive complex societies. No culture-banned artifacts allowed. I'm afraid you'll have to do it the hard way."

"Jhup," Jo said. "I wanna go home."

"Very well. But you'll have to hitch a ride back from Ratshole. We're a hundred and fifty-three thousand miles away from Rhys already."

"Huh?"

San Severina rose and raised a set of Venetian blinds that covered one wall. Beyond the glass: darkness, the stars, and the red rim of Ceti.

Comet Jo stood with his mouth open.

"While you're waiting, we might get some studying done."

The rim of Ceti grew smaller.

six

The actual work on the ship was certainly as easy as tending the underground fields of plyasil. Save for the Lll, it was comparatively pleasant, once it became routine. San Severina's wit and charm made the language lessons a peak of pleasure in an otherwise enjoyable day. Once she rather surprised both Jo and me by saying during one lesson when he seemed particularly recalcitrant and demanded another reason for why he had to improve his Interling: "Besides, think how tiring your clumsy speech will be to your readers."

"My what?" He had already, with difficulty, mastered his final consonants.

"You have undertaken an enterprise of great pith and moment, and I am sure someday somebody will set it down. If you don't improve your diction, you will lose your entire audience before page forty. I suggest you seriously apply yourself, because you are in for quite an exciting time, and it would be rather sad if everyone abandoned you halfway through because of your atrocious grammar and pronunciation."

Her Multiplexedness San Severina certainly had *my* number down.

Four days out, Jo was watching Elmer carefully while he sat whistling at the T-ward viewport. When he had (definitely) decided that the Captain was not engaged in anything it would be fatal to interrupt, he put his hands behind his back and said, "Elmer?"

Elmer looked around. "Yeah. What is it?"

"Elmer, how come everybody knows more about what I'm doing on this boat than I do?"

"Because they've been doing it longer than thou hast."

"I don't mean about my work. I mean about my trip and the message and everything."

"Oh." Elmer shrugged. "Simplex, complex, and multiplex."

Jo was used to having the three words shoved at him in answer to just about anything he didn't comprehend, but this time he said, "I want another answer."

The Captain leaned forward on his knees, thumbed the side of his nose, and frowned. "Look, thou hast come on board, telling us that thou must take a message to Empire Star about the Lll, so we—"

"Elmer, wait a minute. How do you know the message concerns the Lll?"

Elmer looked surprised. "Doesn't it?"

"I don't know," Jo said.

"Oh," Elmer said. "Well, I do. It does concern the Lll. How it concerns the Lll thou wilt have to find out later, but I can assure thee that it does. That's why Ron showed them to thee first off, and why San Severina is so interested in thee."

"But how does everybody know when I don't?" He felt exasperation growing again in the back of his throat.

"Thou art going to Empire Star," Elmer began again, patiently, "and it is the Empire

that protects the Lll."

Comet Jo nodded.

"They are extremely concerned about them, as they should be, as we all are. Thou hast with thee a crystallized Tritovian, and the Tritovians have spearheaded the movement for the emancipation of the Lll. They have worked for it for nearly a thousand years. Therefore, the probability is very high that thy message concerns the Lll."

"Oh . . . that makes sense. But San Severina seems to know things she couldn't even see or figure out."

Elmer gestured for Jo to come closer. "For a person to survive a war that reduces sixty-eight billion people to twenty-seven individuals, that person must know a great deal. And it's a little silly to be surprised that such a person knows a trifle more than thou or I. It's not only silly, it is *unbelievably* simplex. Now get back to work, shuttle-bum."

Having to admit that it was pretty simplex after all, Jo went down in the hole to turn over the boysh and rennedox the kibblepobs. He would not have to play for the Lll again until after supper.

• • • •

Two days after that, they landed in Ratshole. San Severina took him shopping in the open market and bought him a black velvet contour-cloak with silver embroidery whose patterns changed with the pressure of the light under which it was viewed. Next she took him to a body salon. During the trip he had gotten as grimy as any other shuttle-bum. Holding him gently by the ear, she extended him to the white-smocked proprietor. "Groom this," she said.

"For what?" the proprietor asked.

"First for Earth, then for a long journey."

When they were finished, his braid was gone, his claws had been clipped, and he had been cleaned from teeth to toenails. "How do you like yourself?" she asked, placing the cloak over his shoulders.

Jo ran his hand over his short, yellow hair. "I look like a girl." He frowned. Then he looked at his fingernails. "I just hope I don't run into any kepards on the way." Now he looked at the mirror again. "The cloak's great, though."

When they went outside again, Di'k looked once at Jo, blinked, and got so upset that he giggled himself into the hiccups and had to be carried back to the Transport Area while his belly was scratched and he pulled himself together.

"It's a shame I'm going to have to get dirty again," he told San Severina. "But it's dirty work."

San Severina laughed. "Most delightfully simplex child! You will travel the rest of the way to Earth as my protégé."

"But what about Ron and Elmer?"

"They have already taken off. The Lll have been transferred to another ship."

Jo was surprised, sad, then curious.

"San Severina?"

"Yes?"

"Why have you been doing all this for me?"

She kissed his cheek, then danced back from a halfhearted swipe Di'k made with his horns. Jo was still scratching his tummy. "Because you are a very beautiful boy, and very important."

"Oh," he said.

"Do you understand?"

"No." They continued to the ship.

• • • •

A week later they stood together on a rocky rise, watching the comparatively tiny disk of the sun set behind the Brooklyn Bridge. A thin worm of water crawled along the dried, black mud ditch still referred to in their guidebook as the East River. The jungle whispered behind them. Across the "river" the webbed cables lowered the bridge itself to the white sands of Brooklyn. "It's smaller than the one at home," Jo said. "But it's very nice."

"You sound disappointed."

"Oh, not with the bridge," Jo said.

"Is it because I have to leave you here?"

"Well . . ." He stopped. "I'd like to say yes. Because I think it would make you feel better. But I don't want to lie."

"The truth is always multiplex," San Severina said, "and you must get in the habit of dealing with multiplexity. What's on your mind?"

"Remember I was saying how nice everybody has been up till now? And you said I could stop expecting people to be nice once I got to Earth? That scares me."

"I also said there would be things other than people that would be nice."

"But people means any sapient being from any life-system. You taught me that. What else, if it's not people?" Suddenly he caught her hand. "You're going to leave me all alone, and I may never see you again!"

"That's right," she said. "But I wouldn't just throw you out into the universe with nothing. So I will give you a piece of advice: find the Lump."

"Eh . . . where do you suggest I find it?" He was bewildered again.

"It's too big to come to Earth. I last saw it on the Moon. It was waiting to have an adventure. You might be just what it's waiting for. I'm sure it will be nice to you; it was always very nice to me."

"It's not a people?"

"No. There, I've given you your advice. I'm going now. I have a lot to do, and you have some idea of the pain I am in till it's accomplished."

"San Severina!"

She stopped.

"That day on Ratshole, when we went shopping, and you laughed and called me a delightfully simplex child—when you laughed, were you happy?"

Smiling, she shook her head. "The Lll are always with me. I must go now."

She backed away, till the leaves brushed across her silver lips, dress, and fingertips. Then she turned, carrying with her the incredible sadness of Lll ownership. Jo watched her, then turned back to see the last points of sunlight melt from the sand.

• • • •

It was night when he got back to the Transport Terminal. Earth was a large enough tourist area so that there were always people beneath the glittering ceiling. He had not even begun to think about how he was going to get to the Moon, and was walking around expending his curiosity, when a portly, well dressed gentleman began a conversation. "I say there, young fellow, but you've been here for some time, haven't you? Waiting for a ship?"

"No," Jo said.

"I saw you here this afternoon with that charming young lady, and I couldn't help seeing you this evening. My name's Oscar." He extended his hand.

"Comet Jo," Jo said, and shook it.

"Where you off to?"

"I'd like to get to the Moon. I hitchhiked in from Rhys."

"My, my! That's a long way. What ship are you taking?"

"I don't know. I guess you can't hitch from the terminal very well, can you? I suppose I'd do better to try a commercial stop."

"Certainly, if you wanted to hitch. Of course, if Alfred doesn't show up, maybe you can use his ticket. He's missed two ships already; I don't know why I stick around here waiting for him. Except that we *did* make plans to go together."

"To the Moon?"

"That's right."

"Oh, great," Jo said, brightening. "I hope he doesn't get here—" He caught himself. "That came out all simplex, didn't it?"

"The truth is always multiplex," intoned Oscar.

"Yeah. That's what *she* said."

"The young lady you were with this afternoon?"

Jo nodded.

"Who was she, anyway?"

"San Severina."

"I've heard the name. What was she doing in this arm of the galaxy?"

"She just bought some Lll. She had some work to do."

"Bought *some* Lll, eh? And she didn't leave you with any money for a ticket? You'd think she could spare you the hundred and five credits for Moon fare."

"Oh, she's a very generous person," Jo said. "And you mustn't think badly of her because she bought the Lll. It's awfully sad to own them."

"If I had enough money to buy Lll," said Oscar, "nothing, but *nothing* could make me sad. *Some* Lll? How many did she buy?"

"Seven."

Oscar put his hand on his forehead and whistled. "And the price goes up geometrically! It costs four times as much to buy two as it does to buy one, you know. She didn't give you *any* fare?"

Jo shook his head.

"That's incredible. I never heard of such a thing. Have you any idea how fabulously wealthy that woman must be?"

Jo shook his head again.

"You're not very bright, are you?"

"I never asked how much they cost, and she never told me. I was just a shuttle-bum on her ship."

"Shuttle-bum? That sounds exciting. I always wanted to do something like that when I was your age. Never had the nerve, though." The portly man suddenly looked around the terminal with a perturbed expression. "Look, Alfred isn't going to show up. Use his ticket. Just go up to the desk and ask for it."

"But I don't have any of Alfred's identification," Jo said.

"Alfred never has his identification with him. Always losing his wallet and things like that. Whenever I make reservations for him, I always stipulate that he will probably not have any identification with him. Just tell them you're Alfred A. Douglas. They'll give it to you. Hurry up now."

"Well, okay." He made his way through the people to one of the desk clerks.

"Excuse me," he said. "You've got a ticket for A. Douglas?"

The desk clerk looked through his clipboard. "Yeah. It's right here." He grinned at Jo. "You must have had a pretty good time while you were on Earth."

"Huh?"

"This ticket's been waiting for you for three days."

"Oh," Jo said. "Well, I was sort of in bad shape, and I didn't want my parents to see me till I got myself together."

The desk clerk nodded and winked. "Here's your ticket."

"Thanks," Jo said, and went back to Oscar.

"The next ship's boarding right now," Oscar said. "Come along, come along. He'll just have to figure out some other way to get there."

On the ship, Jo asked, "Do you know if the Lump is still on the Moon?"

"I would expect so. He never goes anywhere, that I've heard of."

"Do you think I'll have trouble finding him?"

"I doubt it. Isn't that a beautiful view out the window?"

• • • •

Oscar was recounting still another off-color story when they walked from the terminal on Luna. A bright crescent of sunlight lined the plastidome that arched a mile above their heads. The lunar mountains curved away on their right, and Earth hung like a greenish poker chip behind them.

Suddenly someone cried, *"There* they are!"

A woman screamed and moved backward.

"Get them!" someone else called.

"What in the . . . ?" Oscar began to splutter.

Jo looked around. Habit made him raise his left hand. But the claws were gone. Four men—one behind, one in front, one on either side . . . He ducked and bumped into Oscar, who . . . fell apart! Pieces went whirling and skittering about and under his feet.

He looked around, as the four men also exploded. The buzzing, humming fragments whirled through the air, circling him, drawing closer, blurring the bewildered faces of the other debarkees. Then suddenly all the pieces coalesced, and Jo was in shaking darkness. A light came on, just as he collapsed.

"Bosie!" someone shrieked. "Bosie . . . !"

Jo landed in a bubble chair in a very small room which seemed to be moving, but he couldn't be sure. A voice that was Oscar's said, "April fool. Surprise."

"Jhup!" Jo exclaimed, and stood up. "Wha' the jhup is goin'—what's going on?"

"April fool," the voice repeated. "It's my birthday. You look a mess; you haven't let all this upset you?"

"I'm scared to death. What is this? Who are you?"

"I'm the Lump," the Lump said. "I thought you knew."

"Knew what?"

"All that business with Oscar and Alfred and Bosie. I thought you were just playing along."

"Playing along with what? Where am I?"

"On the Moon, of course. I just thought it would be a clever way of getting you here. San Severina *didn't* pay your fare, you know. I suppose she just assumed I would. Well, since I'm footing the bill, you have to allow me a little fun. You didn't get it?"

"Get what?"

"It was a literary allusion. I make them all the time."

"Well, watch it, next time. What are you, anyway?"

"A linguistic ubiquitous multiplex. Lump to you."

"Some sort of computer?"

"Um-hum. More or less."

"Well, what's supposed to happen now?"

"You're supposed to tell *me,"* the Lump said. "I just help."

"Oh," Jo said.

There was a giggle from behind the bubble chair, and Di'k marched out, sat down in front of Jo, and looked at him reproachfully.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my home console. You can rest up and make plans there. Sit back and relax. We'll be there in three or four minutes."

Jo sat back. He didn't relax, but he took out his ocarina and played on it until a door opened in the front wall.

"Home again, home again, back the same day," said the Lump. "Won't you come in?"

seven

"I"—he flung his cape at the console—"have got"—he hurled the pouch against the glass wall—"to get outta here!" His final gesture was a flying kick at Di'k. Di'k dodged; Jo stumbled, and regained his balance shaking.

"Who's stopping you?" the Lump asked.

"Jhup ya," Jo grunted. "Look, I've been here for three weeks, and every time I get ready to go, we end up in one of those ridiculous conversations that last for nine hours, and then I'm too tired." He walked down the hall and picked up his cloak. "All right, so I'm stupid. But why do you take such delight in rubbing it in? I can't help it if I'm a dark-sided noplex—"

"You're not noplex," the Lump said. "Your view of things is quite complex by now—though there is a good deal of understandable nostalgia for your old simplex perceptions. Sometimes you try to support them just for the sake of argument. Like the time we were discussing the limiting psychological factors in the apprehension of the specious present, and you insisted on maintaining that—"

"Oh, no you don't!" Jo said. "I'm not getting into another one." By now he'd reached his pouch at the other end of the hall. "I'm leaving. Di'k, let's go."

"You," said the Lump, a lot more authoritatively than it usually spoke, "are being silly."

"So I'm simplex. I'm still going."

"Intelligence and plexity have nothing to do with each other."

"There's the spaceship you just spent four days teaching me how to use," Jo said, pointing off through the glass wall. "You put a hypno implant of the route in my head the first night I was here. What under the light of seven suns is stopping me?"

"Nothing is *stopping* you," replied the Lump. "And if you would get it out of your head that something was, you could relax and do this thing sensibly."

Exasperated, Jo turned to face the sixty-foot wall of microlinks and logic-blocks, with their glitter of check lights and reprogram keyboards. "Lump, I *like* it here. You're great to have for a friend, you really are. But I get all my food, all my exercise, everything; and

I'm going crazy. Do you think it's easy just to walk out and leave you like this?"

"Don't be so emotional," the Lump said. "I'm not set up to deal with that sort of thing."

"Do you know that since I've stopped being a shuttle-bum, I've done less work than I ever have in my life during any comparable period?"

"You have also changed more than you have during any comparable period."

"Look, Lump, try and understand." Jo dropped his cloak and walked back over to the console. It was a large mahogany desk. He pulled out the chair, crawled in under it, and hugged his knees. "Lump, I don't think you *do* understand. So listen. Here you are, in touch with all the libraries and museums of this arm of the galaxy. You've got lots of friends, people like San Severina and the other people who're always stopping by to see you. You write books, make music, paint pictures. Do you think you could be happy in a little one-product culture where there was nothing to do on Saturday night except get drunk, with just one teletheater, and no library, where maybe four people had been to the University, and you never saw them anyway because they were making too much money, and everybody knew everybody else's business?"

"No."

"Well, I could, Lump."

"Why did you leave, then?"

"Well . . . because of the message. And because there were a lot of things I don't think I really appreciated. I don't think I was ready to leave. *You* couldn't be happy there. *I* could. It's as simple as that, and I don't really think you fully comprehend that."

"I do," Lump said. "I hope you can be happy in someplace like that. Because that's what most of the universe is composed of. You're slated to spend a great deal of time in places like that, and if you *couldn't* appreciate them, it would be rather sad."

Di'k looked under the desk and then jumped into Jo's lap. It was always ten degrees warmer under the desk, and the two warmblooded creatures, Di'k and Jo, independently or together, sought the spot out again and again.

"Now *you* listen," Lump said.

Jo leaned his head against the side of the desk. Di'k jumped down from his lap, went out, and came back a moment later dragging the plastic pouch. Jo opened it and took out the ocarina.

"There are things I can tell you, most of which I have already told you. There are things you have to ask me. Very few of them have you asked. I know much more about you than you know about me. And if we are to be friends—which is very important for you and for me—that situation must be changed."

Jo put his ocarina down. "That's right—I don't know that much about you, Lump. Where do you come from?"

"I was built by a dying Lll to house its disassociating consciousness."

"Lll?" Jo asked.

"You'd almost forgotten about them, hadn't you?"

"No I didn't."

"You see, my mind is a Lll mind."

"But you don't make me sad."

"I'm half Lll and half machine. So I forfeit the protection."

"You're a Lll?" Jo asked again, incredulously. "It never occurred to me. Now that you've told me, do you think it will make any difference?"

"I doubt it," the Lump said. "But if you say anything about some of your best friends, I will lose a great deal of respect for you."

"What about my best friends?" Jo asked.

"Another allusion. It's all just as well you didn't get it."

"Lump, why don't we go on together?" Jo said suddenly. "I am leaving—that I've made up my mind to. Why don't you come with me?"

"Delightful idea. I thought you'd never ask. That's the only way you could get out of here anyway. Of course, the area in which we're going is very hostile to free Lll. It's right into Empire territory. They protect Lll, and they get rather upset if one shrugs off their protection and decides to stay free on her or his own. Some of the things they have been known to do are atrocious."

"Well, if anybody asks, just say you're a computer. Like I said, I wouldn't have known if you hadn't said anything."

"I do *not* intend to pass," the Lump said sternly.

"Then *I'll* say you're a computer. But let's get going. We'll be here for hours if this keeps up. I can feel another one of those discussions starting." He stood up from under the desk and started for the door.

"Comet?"

Jo stopped and looked back over his shoulder. "What? Don't change your mind on me now."

"Oh, no. I'm definitely going. But . . . well, if I were—now be honest—just lumping along the street, do you really think people would just say, 'Oh, there goes a linguistic ubiquitous multiplex,' and not think about Lll?"

"That's what I'd say if I said anything at all."

"All right. Take the tube to Journal Square, and I'll meet you in forty minutes."

Di'k octopeded after Jo as he ran across the cracked, dusty plain of the Moon toward the egg-shaped spaceship.

• • • •

The tube was an artificial stasis current that took ships quickly beyond Pluto, where they could leave the system without fear of heavy solar-dust damage.

The great slab of plastic, some ten miles on either side—Journal Square—supported buildings, its own atmosphere, and several amusement areas. Jo parked his ship on a side street and stepped into the chill air.

Soldiers were practicing drill formation in the square.

"What are they doing that for?" he asked one uniformed man resting on the side.

"It's the field brigade of the Empire Army. They'll be heading out of there in a few days; they won't be here long."

"I wasn't objecting," Jo said. "Just curious."

"Oh," the soldier said, and offered no further explanation.

"Where are they going?" Jo asked after a moment.

"Look," the soldier said, turning to Jo as he would to a persistent child, "everything about the Empire Army that you can't see immediately is secret. If where they're going doesn't concern you, forget it. If it does, go see if you can get clearance from Prince Nactor."

"Nactor?" Jo asked.

"That one." The soldier pointed to a dark man with a goatee who was leading one platoon.

"I don't think it does," Jo said.

The soldier gave him a disgusted look, got up, and moved away. Together black capes swung out as the men snapped briskly around a turn.

Then there was a commotion among the spectators. People looked up and began to point and talk excitedly.

It caught the sun, spinning toward the square, getting larger and larger. It was roughly cubical and—huge! As one face turned toward the light, another disappeared, till Jo suddenly regained his sense of proportion: it was nearly a quarter of a mile long on each side.

It struck the square, and Jo and all the soldiers—and one of the taller buildings—fell down. There was mass confusion, sirens sounded, and people ran to and from the object.

Jo started running toward it. Low gravity got him there fairly quickly. There were a couple of large cracks in the square that jagged out across the area. He leaped across one and saw stars below him.

Catching his breath, he landed on the other side and proceeded a little more slowly. The object, he realized, was covered with some sort of boiling jelly; the jelly looked surprisingly familiar, but he could not place it. The face of the object that was turned toward him, he could make out through the mildly smoking slop, was glass. And beyond the glass, dim in the interior transplutonian night: microlinks, logic-blocks, and the faint glitter of check-lights.

"Lump!" Jo cried, running forward.

"Shhhh," a familiar voice said, muffled by jelly. "I'm trying not to attract attention."

Soldiers were marching by now. "What the hell *is* that thing, anyway?" said one.

"It's a linguistic ubiquitous multiplex," said the other.

The first scratched his head and looked up and down the length of the wall. "Ubiquitous as hell, isn't it?"

A third was examining the edge of a crack in the square. "Think they're gonna have to get a damned Lll in here to rebuild this?"

Lump whispered, "Just let one of them say anything to my face. Just one—"

"Oh, shut up," Jo said, "or I won't let you marry my daughter."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's an allusion," Jo explained. "I did some reading while you were taking a nap last week."

"Very funny, very funny," the Lump said.

The soldiers started to walk away. "They won't get no Lll in," one of the soldiers said, scratching his ear. "This is soldier work. We do all the real building around here anyway. Wish there was a damned Lll around, though."

Several of Lump's check-lights changed color behind the jelly.

"What's that jhup all over you?" Jo asked, stepping back now.

"My spaceship," the Lump said. "I'm using an organiform. They're much more comfortable for inanimate objects like me. Haven't you ever seen one before?"

"No—yes! Back on Rhys. That's what the Tritovian and those other things came in."

"Odd," said Lump. "They don't usually use organiforms. They're not particularly inanimate."

More people were gathering around the computer. The sirens were getting close.

"Let's just get out of here," Jo said. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Lump said. "I just wonder about the square."

"Bloody but unbowed," Jo said. "That's another allusion. Get going and we'll reconnoiter at Tantamount."

"Fine," Lump said. "Step back. I'm taking off."

There was a bubbling, a tremendous *suck,* and Jo staggered in the wind. People started screaming again.

Back at Jo's ship, Di'k was hiding under the dashboard with forepaws over his head. Jo pushed the takeoff button, and the robo-crew took over. The confusion of the square dropped beneath them. He ran over his hyperstasis checkout, then signaled for the jump.

The stasis generators surged, and the ship began to slip into hyperstasis. He hadn't finished slipping when the ship lurched and he smashed forward into the dashboard. His wrists took the shock, and he bounced away with both of them aching. Di'k screeched.

eight

Jo pried his canines out of his lower lip.

"You're not playing chess," the voice went on. "If you occupy my square, I will not be removed from the board. Look out, next time."

"Gnnnnnng," Jo said, rubbing his mouth.

"Same to you and many more."

Jo shook his head and put on his sensory helmet. It smelled like old jhup. It sounded like scrap metal being crushed under a hydraulic press. But it looked beautiful.

Ramps curved away into structures that blossomed like flowers. Thin spires erupted at

their tips in shapes of metal, and fragile observation domes were supported on slender pylons.

"You might come out of there and see if you've done any damage to us."

"Oh," Jo said. "Yeah. Sure."

He started to the lock and was about to release it when he realized the warning light was still on. "Hey," he called back toward the intercom, "there's no air out there."

"I thought you were going to take care of that," the voice answered. "Just a second." The light went off.

"Thanks," Jo said. He pulled the release. "What are you, anyway?"

Outside the lock a balding man in a white smock was coming down one of the ramps. "This is the Geodesic Survey Station that you almost ran down, youngster." His voice was much diminished, in person. "You better get on inside the force-field, before this atmosphere escapes. I don't know what you thought you were doing anyway."

"I was finishing up a stasis jump, on my way to Tantamount. Simplex of me, wasn't it?" Jo started back up the ramp with the man, who shrugged.

"I never pass judgments like that," the man said. "Now tell me your specialty."

"I don't have one, I don't think."

The man frowned. "I don't think we need a synthesizer right now. They tend to be extremely long-lived."

"I know just about everything there is to know about raising and storing plyasil," Jo said.

The man smiled. "I'm afraid that wouldn't do much good. We're only up to volume one hundred and sixty-seven: *Bba* to *Bbaab."*

"Its common term is jhup," Jo said.

The man smiled benignly at him. *"Jh* is still a long way away. But if you're alive in five or six hundred years, we'll take your application."

"Thanks," Jo said. "But I'll just forget it."

"Very well," the man said, turning to him. "Good-bye."

"Well, what about the damage to *my* ship? Aren't you going to check me over? You're not supposed to be here, in the first place. I've got through clearance on this path."

"Young man," the gentleman said, "first of all, we have priority. Second of all, if you don't want a job, you are abusing our hospitality by using up our air. Third of all, there is advance work being done in *biology, human*—and if you bother me anymore, I'll ship you off for a specimen and have you cut up in little pieces. And don't think I won't."

"What about my message?" Jo demanded. "I've got to get a message through concerning the Lll, to Empire Star. And it's important. That's why I rammed into you in the first place."

The man's face had become hostile.

"Eventually," he said, evenly, "we will finish our project, and there will be enough knowledge so that Lll will be economically unfeasible, because building will be able to proceed without them. If you want to benefit the Lll, I'll order you sliced up immediately.

Father is working on the adenoids now. There is a raft of work to be done on the bicuspids. We've just started the colon, and the duodenum is a complete mystery. If you want to deliver your message, deliver it here."

"But I don't know what it is!" Jo said, backing out toward the edge of the force-field. "I think I'll be going."

"We have a computer for just such problems as yours," the man said. "Not with a lungful of *our* air, you're not," he added, and lunged toward Jo.

Jo saw where he was lunging and simply wasn't there.

The force-field was permeable, and he ducked through, sprang to the lock of his ship, and slammed it behind him. The warning light blinked on less than a second afterward.

He threw her into reverse and prayed that the automatic pilot could still negotiate the currents and move to a deeper stasis level. It did, if a little jerkily. The Geodesic Survey Station faded from the viewplates of the sensory helmet that was lying face-up on the dashboard.

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He reconnoitered easily with Lump in an orbit around Tantamount. It was a planet of iced methane with so much volcanic activity that the surface was constantly being broken and exploded. It was the single daughter of an intensely hot white dwarf, so that from here they looked like two eyes, one jeweled and glittering, one of silver-gray, spying on the night.

"Lump, I want to go home. Back to Rhys. Give up the whole thing."

"What in the world for?" came the computer's incredulous voice over the intercom.

Jo leaned on his elbows, looking morosely at his ocarina. "The multiplex universe doesn't appeal to me. I don't like it. I want to get away from it. If I'm complex now, it's too bad, it's a mistake, and if I ever get back to Rhys, I'll try as hard as I can to be simplex. I really will."

"What's got into you?"

"I just don't like the people. I think it's that simple. You ever heard of the Geodesic Survey Station?"

"Certainly have. You run into them?"

"Yeah."

"That *is* unfortunate. Well, there are certain sad things in the multiplex universe that must be dealt with. And one of the things is simplexity."

"Simplexity?" Jo asked. "What do you mean?"

"And you better be thankful that you have acquired as much multiplexity of vision as you have, or you never would have gotten away from them alive. I've heard tell of other simplex creatures encountering them. They don't come back."

"They're simplex?"

"Good God, yes. Couldn't you tell?"

"But they're compiling all that information. And the place they live—it's beautiful. They couldn't be stupid and have built that."

"First of all, most of the Geodesic Survey Station was built by Lll. Second of all, as I have said many times before, intelligence and plexity do not necessarily go together."

"But how was I supposed to know?"

"I suppose it won't hurt to outline the symptoms. Did they ask you a single question?"

"No."

"That's the first sign, though not conclusive. Did they judge you correctly, as you could tell from their statements about you?"

"No. They thought I was looking for a job."

"Which implies that they should have asked questions. A multiplex consciousness always asks questions when it has to."

"I remember," Jo said, putting down the ocarina, "when Charona was trying to explain it to me, she asked me what was the most important thing there was. If I asked them that, I know what they would have said: their blasted dictionary, or encyclopedia, or whatever it is."

"Very good. Anyone who can give a nonrelative answer to that question is simplex."

"I said jhup," Jo recalled wistfully.

"They're in the process of cataloging all the knowledge in the Universe."

"That's more important than jhup, I suppose," Jo said.

"From a complex point of view, perhaps. But from a multiplex view, they're about the same. First of all, it's a rather difficult task. When last I heard, they were already up to the B's, but I'm sure they don't have a thing on *Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaavdqx."*

"What's . . . well, what you just said?"

"It's the name for a rather involved set of deterministic moral evaluations taken through a relativistic view of the dynamic moment. I was studying it some years back."

"I wasn't familiar with the term."

"I just made it up. But what it stands for is quite real, and well worth an article. I don't think they could even comprehend it. But from now on, I shall refer to it as *Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaavdqx,* and there are two of us who know the word now—so it's valid."

"I guess I get the point."

"Besides, cataloging all knowledge, even all available knowledge, while admirable, is . . . well, the only word is simplex."

"Why?"

"One can learn all one needs to know; or one can learn what one wants to know. But to need to learn all one wants to know, which is what the Geodesic Survey Station is doing, even falls apart semantically. What's the matter with your ship?"

"The Geodesic Survey Station again. We collided."

"I don't like the looks of it."

"My takeoff was sort of jerky."

"Don't like the looks of it at all. Especially considering how far we have to go. Why don't you hop on over here and travel with me? This organiform is a beauty, and I think I've got my landings and takeoffs a little more under control."

"If you promise not to break my back when we land."

"Promise," the Lump said. "I'll open up. Swing around to your left and you can leave that jalopy right where it is."

They made contact.

"Jo," Lump said, as the flexible tube attached to his air lock, "if you really want to, you can go back. But there comes a point where going back is harder than going on. You've received a great deal of very specialized education. Not only what San Severina and I have tried to teach you, but even back on Rhys you were learning."

Jo started through the tube. "I still wanna go home." He slowed his pace as he moved toward the console room. "Lump, sometimes, even if you're simplex, you ask yourself, who am I? All right, you say the Geodesic Survey Station was simplex. That makes me feel a little better. But I'm still a very ordinary kid who would like to get back to a jhup field, and maybe fight off some wild kepards. That's who I am. That's what I know."

"If you went back, you would find the people around you very much like you found the Geodesic Survey. You left your home, Jo, because you weren't happy. Remember why?"

Jo reached the console room but stopped, his hands on either jamb. "Jhup, yeah. Sure I remember. Because I thought I was different. Then the message came along, and I thought that was proof I was special. Else they wouldn't have given it to me. Don't you see, Lump —" he leaned forward on his hands—"if I really knew I was something special—I mean if I was *sure*—then I wouldn't get so upset by things like the Survey Station. But most of the time I just feel lost and unhappy and ordinary."

"You're you, Jo. You're you and everything that went into you, from the way you sit for hours and watch Di'k when you want to think, to the way you turn a tenth of a second faster in response to something blue than to something red. You're all you ever thought, all you ever hoped, and all you ever hated, too. And all you've learned. You've been learning a lot, Jo."

"But if I knew that it was mine, Lump. That's what I want to be sure of: that the message was really important and that I was the only one who could deliver it. If I really knew that this education I'd gotten had made me—well, like I say, something special—then I wouldn't mind going on. Jhup, I'd be happy to do it."

"Jo, you're you. And that's as important as you want to make it."

"Maybe that's the most important thing there is, Lump. If there is an answer to that question, Lump, that's what it is, to know you're yourself and nobody else."

Just as Jo stepped inside the console room, the speakers from the communications unit began to whisper. As Jo looked around, the whisper increased. "What's that, Lump?"

"I'm not sure."

The door closed, the tube fell away, and the wrecked cruiser drifted back. Jo watched it through the glass wall covered with vaguely distorting organiform.

The speaker was laughing now.

Di'k scratched his ear with one foot.

"It's coming from over there," Lump said. "It's coming awfully fast, too."

Laughter got louder, reached hysteria, filled the high chamber. Something hurtled by the Lump's glass wall, then suddenly swung around and came up short, twenty feet away.

The laughing stopped and was replaced by exhausted gasps.

The thing outside looked like a huge chunk of rock, only the front face had been polished. As they drifted slightly in the glare of Tantamount, the white light slipped from the surface; Jo saw it was a transparent plate. Behind it a figure leaned forward, hands over his head, feet wide apart. Even from here Jo could see the chest heave in time to the panting that stormed through the console room. "Lump, turn down the volume, will you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." The panting ceased to be something happening inside his ear and settled to a reasonable sound a respectable number of feet away. "Do you want to speak to him, or shall I?"

"You go ahead."

"Who are you?" Lump asked.

"Ni Ty Lee. Who are you, blast it, to be so interesting?"

"I'm the Lump. I've heard of you, Ni Ty Lee."

"I've never heard of you, Lump. But I should have, I know. Why are you so interesting?"

Jo whispered, "Who is he?"

"Shhh," the Lump said. "Tell you later. What were you doing, Ni Ty Lee?"

"I was running toward that sun there, and staring at it, and thinking how beautiful it was, and laughing because it was so beautiful, and laughing because it was going to destroy me, and still be beautiful, and I was writing a poem about how beautiful that sun was and how beautiful the planet that circled it was: and I was doing all that until I saw something more interesting to do, and that was find out who *you* were."

"Then come aboard and find out some more."

"I already know you're a linguistic ubiquitous multiplex with a Lll-based consciousness," Ni Ty Lee answered. "Is there any more I should find out before I sail into the fires?"

"I have a boy on board your own age whom you know nothing about at all."

"Then I'm coming over. Get your tube out." He started forward.

"How did he know you were Lll?" Jo asked as the chunk of rock approached.

"I don't know," Lump said. "Some people can tell right off. That's better than the ones who sit around and talk to you for an hour before they get around to asking. Only I bet he doesn't know *which* Lll I am."

The tube connected up with Ni's vessel. A moment later the door opened, and Ni Ty Lee stepped leisurely inside, his thumbs in his pants pockets, and looked around.

Jo was still wearing the black cape San Severina had bought him on Ratshole. Ni Ty Lee, however, looked like a shuttle-bum. He was barefooted. He wore no shirt. His faded

work pants had one frayed knee. His too-long hair was silver-blond and clutched at his ears and forehead; his face was high-cheeked, with sloping Oriental eyes the color of slate chips.

The face fixed on Jo and grinned. "Hello," he said, and came forward.

He extended his hand, and Jo started to shake it. There were claws on the fingers of his right hand.

Ni's head leaned to the side. "I'm going to write a poem about the expressions that just went over your face. You're from Rhys, and you used to work in the jhup fields, and curl up by the fires at New Cycle, and kill kepards when they broke through." He made a small, sad, amused sound without opening his mouth. "Hey, Lump. I know all about him now, and I'll be on my way." He began to turn.

"Were you on Rhys? You were really on Rhys?" Jo said.

Ni turned back. "Yes. I was. Three years ago. Hitched there as a shuttle-bum and worked for awhile down in field seven. That's where I got these." He held up his claws.

A pulsing ache had begun in the back of Jo's throat that he had not felt since first he had played for the Lll. "I worked field seven just before New Cycle."

"Did Keeper James ever knock some sense into that brat son of his? I get along with most people, but I got into a fight four times with that pesky know-it-all. And once I nearly killed him."

"I . . . I did," Jo whispered.

"Oh," Ni said. He blinked. "Well, I guess I can't really say I'm surprised." But he looked taken aback nevertheless.

"You really were there?" Jo asked. "You're not just . . . reading my mind?"

"I was there. In the flesh. For three and a half weeks."

"That's not very long," Jo said.

"I didn't say I was there a *long* time."

"But you *were* really there," Jo repeated.

"It's not that big a universe, friend. It's too bad your culture was so simplex, or there'd be more to know about you and I'd stay longer." He turned once more to leave.

"Wait a minute!" Jo called. "I want . . . I *need* to talk to you."

"You do?"

Jo nodded.

Ni Ty put his hands back in his pockets. "Nobody's needed me for a long time. That should be interesting enough to write a poem about." He swaggered over to the console and sat down on top of the desk. "I'll hang around awhile, then. What do you need to talk about?"

Jo was silent, while his mind darted. "Well, what's your spaceship made of?" he asked at last.

Ni Ty looked up at the ceiling. "Hey, Lump," he called, "is this guy putting me on? He doesn't really need to know what my ship is made of, does he? If he's putting me on, I'm going to go. People put me on all the time, and I know all about that, and it doesn't

interest me a bit."

"He needs to warm up to what's important," Lump said. "And you need to be patient."

Ni Ty looked back at Jo. "You know, he's right. I'm always leaving words and paragraphs out of my poems because I write too fast. Then nobody understands them. I don't know too much about being patient, either. This might be very interesting after all. This your ocarina?"

Jo nodded.

"I used to play one of these things." He put it to his lips and ran through a bright melody that slowed suddenly at the end.

The knot in Jo's throat tightened further. The tune was the first song he had ever learned on the instrument.

"That's the only tune I ever learned. I should have stuck with it longer. Here, you play. Maybe that'll warm you up."

Jo just shook his head.

Ni Ty shrugged, turned the ocarina over in his hands, then said, "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah," Jo said, after a while.

"I can't help it," Ni Ty said. "I've just done a lot of things."

"May I interject?" the Lump said.

Ni shrugged again. "Sure."

Jo nodded.

"You will find, during your reading, Jo, that certain authors seem to have discovered all the things you have discovered, done all you've done. There was one ancient science fiction writer, Theodore Sturgeon, who would break me up every time I read him. He seemed to have seen every flash of light on a window, every leaf shadow on a screen door, that I have ever seen; done everything I had ever done from playing the guitar to laying over for a couple of weeks on a boat in Arransas Pass, Texas. And he was supposedly writing fiction, and that four thousand years ago. Then you learn that lots of other people find the same things in the same writer, who have done none of the things you've done and seen none of the things you've seen. That's a rare sort of writer. But Ni Ty Lee is that sort. I have read many of your poems, Ni Ty. My appreciation, were I to express it, I'm sure would only prove embarrassing."

"Gee," Ni Ty said. "Thanks." And he got a grin on his face that was too big to hide even by looking at his lap. "I lose most of the best ones. Or don't write them down. I wish I could show you some of them. They're really nice."

"I wish you could too," said the Lump.

"Hey." Ni Ty looked up. "But you need me. I can't even remember what you asked."

"About your ship," Jo said.

"I just hollowed out a chunk of nonporous meteor and bolted in a Kayzon Drive in the back, and ran my controls for igneous permeability."

"Yes, yes!" cried the Lump. "That's exactly how it's done! Bolted the Kayzon in with a left-handed ratchet. The threads run backwards, don't they? It was years ago, but it was

such a beautiful little ship!"

"You're right about the threads," Ni Ty said. "Only I used a pliers."

"It doesn't matter. Just that you really did it. I told you, Jo, with some writers, it's just uncanny."

"There's a problem, though," Ni Ty said. "I never do anything long enough to really get to know it—just long enough to identify it in a line or a sentence, then I'm on to something else. I think I'm afraid. And I write to make up for all the things I really can't do."

At which point I began to twinge a little. I had said the same thing to Norn an hour before we'd cracked up on Rhys, when we had been discussing my last book. Remember me? I'm Jewel.

"But you're only my age," Jo said at last. "How could you do all this and write all this so early?"

"Well, I . . . I mean, it's . . . I guess I don't really know. I just do. I suppose there's a lot I never will do because I'm too busy writing."

"Another interjection," the Lump said. "Would it embarrass you if I told him the story?"

Ni Ty shook his head.

"It's like Oscar and Alfred," Lump said.

Ni Ty looked surprisingly relieved. "Or Paul V. and Arthur R.," he added.

"Like Jean C. and Raymond R.," said Lump, in rhythm.

"Or Willy and Colette."

"It's a recurrent literary pattern," the Lump explained. "An older writer, a younger writer—often a mere child—and something tragic. And something wonderful is given to the world. It's been happening every twenty-five or fifty years since Romanticism."

"Who was the older writer?" Jo asked.

Ni Ty looked down. "Muels Aranlyde."

"I've never heard of him," Jo said.

Ni Ty blinked. "Oh. I thought everybody knew about the whole, unpleasant mess."

"I'd like to meet him," Jo offered.

"I doubt you ever will," said the Lump. "What happened was very, very tragic."

"Aranlyde was Lll." Ni Ty took a breath and began to explain. "We made a long trip together, and . . ."

"You made a long trip with a Lll?"

"Well, he was really only part—" Then he stopped. "I can't help it," he said. "It's what I've done. I swear I can't help it."

"You know about the sadness of the Lll, then," Jo said.

Ni Ty nodded. "Yes. You see, I sold him. I was desperate, I needed the money, and he told me to go ahead."

"You sold him? But why—"

"Economics."

"Oh."

"And with it I bought a less expensive Lll to rebuild the world we had destroyed; so I know about the sadness of Lll, and the sadness of Lll ownership—though it was a small world, and only took a little while. I was explaining that to San Severina only days ago, and she got very upset—she too has bought and sold Lll and used them to rebuild a—"

"You know San Severina?"

"Yes. She gave me Interling lessons when I was a shuttle-bum—"

"No!" Jo cried.

Ni Ty shook his head and whispered, "I swear I can't help it! I swear!"

"No!" He turned and put his hands over his ears, crouched down and staggered.

Behind him, Ni Ty cried out, "Lump, you said he needed me?"

"You are fulfilling his need very well."

Jo whirled. "Get out of here!"

Ni Ty looked frightened and stood up from the desktop.

"It's my life, damn it, not yours. It's mine!" He grabbed Ni's clawed hand. "Mine. I gave it up—but that doesn't mean you can have it."

Ni sucked a quick breath. "It's not interesting now," he said sharply, edging from the desk. "I've been through this too many times before."

"But *I* haven't!" Jo cried. He felt as if something in him had been raped and outraged. "You can't steal my life!"

Suddenly Ni pushed him. Jo slipped to the deck, and the poet stood over him, shaking now. "What the hell makes you think it's yours? Maybe you stole it from *me*. How come I never get to finish anything out? How come any time I get a job, fall in love, have a child, suddenly I'm jerked away and flung into another dung heap where I have to start the same mess all over again? Are you doing that to me? Are you jerking me away from what's mine, picking up for yourself the thousand beautiful lives I've started?" Suddenly he closed his eyes and flung his left hand against his right shoulder. With his head back he hissed to the ceiling, "God, I've said this so many times before! And it bores me, damn it! It bores me!" He'd raked the claws across his shoulder, and five lines of blood trickled to his chest—and for one horrid instant the scene came flashing into Jo's mind when he'd run from Lilly's laughter and stood with his eyes clenched and his head back, and pulled his talons across his shoulder. He shook the memory from his head and blinked his eyes. There was a lot of old scar tissue banding Ni Ty's shoulder under the path the fresh welts cut.

"Always returning, always coming back, always the same things over and over and *over!"* Ni Ty cried.

He lurched toward the door.

"Wait!"

Jo flipped to his belly and scrabbled to his knees after him.

"What are you going to do?" He threw himself around Ni Ty and put his arm across the door.

Ni Ty put his clawed hand around Jo's forearm. Jo shook his head—Billy James had

blocked his way from the corral, and he had put his claws on the boy's arm so, and that's how it all started . . .

"I'm going to get in my ship," Ni Ty said evenly, "and I'm going to face that sun and jam the throttle all the way. I've done it once laughing. This time I'll probably cry. And that damn well better be interesting."

"But *why?"*

"Because someday—"and Ni Ty's face twisted with the strain of words—"somebody else is going to come plunging toward a silver sun, first laughing, then crying, and they'll have read about this, and they'll remember, and suddenly they'll know, don't you see? They'll know that they're not the only ones—"

"But nobody will ever read what you have to say about—"

Ni Ty slapped his arm away and ran down the tube, just missing Di'k, who was stepping down with a sheaf of paper in his mouth.

The tube popped free, and the organiform swarmed together as the door closed in the console room. Jo saw Ni Ty bending at the controls; then he stood and pressed his face and hands against the viewport as the automatic pilot took the hollow meteor into the glare of the sun. Jo squinted after it till his lids ached. The sobbing that came over the intercom lasted for perhaps a minute after the ship was out of sight.

Jo rubbed his hand across his forehead and turned from the wall.

Di'k was sitting on the sheaf of papers, chewing on a dog-eared corner. "What are those?"

"Ni Ty's poems," the Lump said. "The last batch he was working on."

"Di'k, did you steal them out of his ship?" Jo demanded.

"With somebody like that, the only thing you can do is get their work away from them before they destroy it. That's how everything of his we have has been obtained. This has all happened before," Lump said wearily.

"But Di'k didn't know that," Jo said. "You were just stealing, weren't you?" He tried to sound reproving.

"You underestimate your devil-kitten," the Lump said. "He does not have a simplex mind."

Jo bent over and tugged the papers from under Di'k, who finally rolled over and slapped at his hands a couple of times. Then he took them to the desk and crawled underneath.

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Three hours later, when he emerged, Jo walked slowly over to the glass wall and squinted once more at the white dwarf. He turned, blew three notes on his ocarina, then dropped his hand. "I think that's the most multiplex consciousness I've encountered so far."

"He may be," Lump said. "But then, so are you, now."

“I hope he doesn’t plunge into the sun,” Jo said.

“He won’t if he finds something more interesting between here and there.”

“There’s not much out there.”

“It doesn’t take much to interest a mind like Lee’s.”

“The thing you were saying about multiplexity and understanding points of view. He completely took over my point of view, and you were right; it was uncanny.”

“It takes a multiplex consciousness to perceive the multiplexity of another consciousness, you know.”

“I can see why,” Jo said. “He was using all his experiences to understand mine. It made me feel funny.”

“You know he wrote those poems before he even knew you existed.”

“That’s right. But that just makes it stranger.”

“I’m afraid,” Lump said, “you’ve set up your syllogism backwards. You were using your experiences to understand his.”

“I was?”

“You’ve had a lot of experiences recently. Order them multiplexually and they will be much clearer. And when they are clear enough, enough confusion will remain so that you ask the proper questions.”

Jo was silent for a moment, ordering. Then he said, “What was the name of the Lll your mind is based on?”

“Muels Aranlyde,” the Lump said.

Jo turned back to the window. “Then this has all happened before.”

After another minute of silence, the Lump said, “You know you will have to make the last leg of the trip without me.”

“I’d just begun to order that out,” Joe said. “Multiplexually.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be scared as hell.”

“You needn’t be,” Lump said.

“Why not?”

“You’ve got a crystallized Tritovian in your pouch.”

He was referring to me, of course. I hope you haven’t forgotten me, because the rest of the story is going to be incomprehensible if you have.

nine

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Jo asked.

He laid me on a velvet cloth on the desk. The lights in the high ceiling of the console room were dim and had haloes in the faint fog from the humidifiers.

“What’s the most multiplex thing you can do when you are not sure what to do?”

“Ask questions.”

“Then ask.”

"Will it answer?"

"There's an easier way to find that out than by asking me," Lump said.

"Just a second," Jo said. "I have to order my perceptions multiplexually, and it may take a little time. I'm not used to it." After a moment he said, "Why will I have to join the Empire Army and serve Prince Nactor?"

"Excellent," Lump said. "I've been wondering about that one myself."

Because, I broadcast, *the army is going your way.* It was a relief to be able to speak. But that's one of the hardships of crystallization: you can only answer when asked directly.

Incidentally, between the time that Jo said, "I'm not used to it," and the time he asked his question, the radio had come blaring on, and Prince Nactor's voice had announced that all humans in the area were up for immediate conscription, to which Lump had said, "I guess that takes care of your problem." So there's nothing mysterious about Jo's question at all. I want to stress, for those who have followed the argument to this point, that multiplexity is perfectly within the laws of logic. I left the incident out because I thought it was distracting and assumed it was perfectly deducible from Jo's question what had happened, sure that the multiplex reader would supply it for himself. I have done this several times throughout the story.

"Why can't I just deliver my message and go on about my business?" Jo asked.

In crystallization one has the seeming activity of being able to ask rhetorical questions. *Are you ready to deliver the message?* I broadcast.

Jo pounded both fists on the desk. The room seemed to shake as I rocked back and forth.

"Jhup! What *is* the message? That's what I have to find out now. What *is* it?"

Someone has come to free the Lll.

Jo stood up, and concern deepened the young lines of his face. "That's a very important message." The concern turned to a frown. "When will I be ready to deliver it?"

Whenever someone has come to free them.

"But I've come all this way . . ." Jo stopped. "Me? Me free them? But . . . I may be ready to deliver the message, but how will I know when I'm ready to free them?"

If you don't know, I broadcast, *obviously that's not the message.*

Jo felt confused and ashamed. "But it ought to be."

He'd asked no questions, so I could broadcast nothing. But Lump said it for me: "That's the message, but you have misunderstood it. Try and think of another interpretation that contains no contradictions."

Jo turned from the table. "I don't see enough," he said, discouraged.

"Sometimes one must see through someone else's eyes," Lump said. "At this point, I would say if you could use Jewel's, you would be doing yourself a great service."

"Why?"

"You are becoming more and more intimately concerned with the Lll, and our struggle for release. The Tritovians are the most active of the non-Lll species in this struggle. It's

that simple. Besides, it would greatly facilitate your military career."

"Can it be done?" Jo asked.

"A very simple operation," Lump said. "You can perform it yourself. Go get the Tritovian."

Jo went back to the desk and lifted me from the velvet.

"Now pull up your right eyelid."

Jo did. And did other things at Lump's instruction. A minute later he screamed in pain, whirled from the desk, and fell to his knees, with his hands over his face.

"The pain will go away in a little while," the Lump said calmly. "I can give you some eyewash if the stinging is too bad."

Jo shook his head. "It's not the pain, Lump," he whispered. "I see. I see you and me and Di'k and Jewel, only all at the same time. And I see the military ship waiting for me, and even Prince Nactor. But the ship is a hundred and seventy miles away, and Di'k is behind me, and you're all around me, and Jewel's inside me, and I'm . . . not me anymore."

"You better practice walking for a little while," Lump said. "Spiral staircases are particularly difficult at first. On second thought, you'd better get used just to sitting still and thinking. Then we'll go on to more complicated things."

"I'm not me anymore," Jo repeated softly.

"Play your ocarina," Lump suggested.

Jo watched himself remove the instrument from his pouch and place it on his own lips, saw his lids close, one over his left eye, one over the glittering presence that had replaced his right. He heard himself begin a long, slow tune, and with his eyes shut he watched Di'k come tentatively over, then nuzzle his lap.

• • • •

A little later Jo said, "You know, Lump, I don't think talking to Jewel got me anything."

"Certainly not as much as looking through him."

"I'm still awfully foggy about that message."

"You've got to make allowances. When people become as militant as he is, the most multiplex minds get downright linear. But his heart's in the right place. Actually, he said a great deal to you if you can view it multiplexually."

Jo watched his own face become concentrated. It was rather funny, he thought in passing—like an overanxious, towheaded squirrel wearing a diamond monocle. "The message must be the words: *Someone has come to free the Lll.* And I have to be ready to free the Lll. Only it's not me that's going to free them." He waited for Lump to approve his reasoning. There was only silence, however. So he went on: "I wish it were me. But I guess there're reasons why it can't be. I have to be ready to deliver the message, too. The only way I can really be ready is if I make sure whoever is going to free the Lll is ready."

"Very good," the Lump said.

"Where am I going to find this person, and how can I make sure he's ready to free the Lll?"

"You may have to get him ready yourself."

"Me?"

"You've received quite an education in the past few months. You are going to have to impart a good deal of that education to somebody as simplex as you were when you began this journey."

"And lose whatever uniqueness Ni Ty left me with?"

"Yes."

"Then I won't do it," Jo said.

"Oh, come on."

"Look, my old life was stolen from me. Now you want me to give my new life to somebody else. I won't do it."

"That's a very selfish way of—"

"Besides, I know enough about simplex cultures to know that the only thing you could do to them with an army that might shake loose one or two people is destroy it. And I won't."

"Oh," said the Lump. "You've figured that out."

"Yes, I did. And it would be very painful."

"The destruction will happen whether you go or not. The only difference will be that you won't be able to deliver your message."

"Won't he be ready without me?"

"The point is you will have no way to know."

"I'll take the chance," Jo said. "I'm going someplace else. I'll take the gamble that everything will work out for the best, whether I'm there or not."

"You have no idea how risky that is. Look, we have some time. Let's take a little side trip. I want to show you something that will change your mind."

"Lump, I don't think I could take any exposure to slave driven, exploited, long-suffering Lll right now. That's where you want to take me, isn't it?"

"Lll suffering is something that happens to you, not to Lll," the Lump said. "It is impossible to understand the suffering of the Lll from the point of view of the Lll itself unless you are one. Understanding is one of the things the Empire protects them from. Even the Lll can't agree on what's so awful about their situation. But there is enough concurrence so you must take our word. There are certain walls that multiplexity cannot scale. Occasionally it can blow them up, but it is very difficult and leaves scars in the earth. And admitting their impermeability is the first step in their destruction. I am going to show you something that you can appreciate in any plex you like. We are going to talk to San Severina."

ten

"Is this one of the worlds she rebuilt with the Lll?" Jo asked, looking through the silver streets of the empty city, then back to the rolling woody hills that crept to the edge of the breeze-brushed lake behind them.

"This is one of them," said Oscar. "It's the first one finished and will be the last to be repopulated."

"Why?" Jo asked, stepping over the new cast-iron gutter grating on the curb. The bluish sun flamed in the spiral window that circled the great tower to their left. A magnificent fountain sat empty on their right. Jo ran his fingers over the dry, granite rim of the forty-foot pool as they turned past.

"Because she is here."

"How much work remains to be done?"

"All the worlds have been rebuilt. Forty-six of the civilizations have been reestablished. But it's those ethical systems that take time. They'll be in the works for another six months or more." Oscar gestured toward a black metal door, studded with brass. "Right through there."

Jo looked around at the tremendous spires. "It's beautiful," he said. "It really is. I think I understand a little more why she wanted to rebuild it."

"In here," Oscar said.

Jo stepped inside.

"Down these steps."

Their feet echoed in the dim, wide stairwell.

"Right through here." Oscar pushed open a smaller door in the gray stone wall.

As Jo stepped through, he wrinkled his nose. "Smells funn—"

She was naked.

Her wrists and ankles were chained to the floor.

When the gray blade of light fell across her humped back, she reared against the shackles and howled. Her lips pulled back from teeth he hadn't realized were so long. The howl stopped in a grinding rasp.

He watched her.

He watched himself watching her and watched himself back into the door and the door swing to and clank closed behind him.

Strain had caused the muscles of her shoulders to grow hard and defined. Her neck was corded, her shaggy, matted hair hung half across her face. *A comb!* he thought nonsensically. *Oh lord, a red comb!* And watched tears start in his real eye. The other grew crusty dry.

"They keep her here, now," Oscar said. "The chains are just short enough so she can't kill herself."

"Who—"

"There were twenty-six others, remember. Oh, she passed the point a long time ago where if she could release them, she would. But the others keep her here now, like this. And her Lll go on working."

"That's not fair!" Jo cried. "Why doesn't somebody turn her loose!"

"She knew what she was getting into. She told them before that they would have to do this. She knew her limitations." Oscar made a pained face. "Seven of them. That's more than any one person's ever owned at one time. It really *is* too much. And the sadness increases the more the Lll build. Geometrically. Like the price."

Jo stared at her, appalled, fascinated, torn.

"You came here to talk to her," Oscar said. "Go ahead."

Jo walked forward gingerly and watched himself do so. There were scabs on her wrists and ankles.

"San Severina?"

She pulled back, a constrained choking in her throat.

"San Severina, I've got to talk to you."

A thin trickle of blood wormed across the ligaments on the back of her left hand.

"Can't you talk to me? San Severina—"

With rattling links, she lunged for him, her teeth snapping on what would have been his leg had he not dodged back. She bit into her tongue and collapsed shrieking on the stone, her mouth awash with blood.

Jo only saw that he was beating on the door and Oscar was holding him. Oscar got the handle opened, and they stumbled into the bottom of the stairwell. Oscar was breathing hard too as they started up the steps. "I almost felt sorry for her," he said, halfway up.

Shocked, Jo turned to him on the stairway. "You don't . . ."

"I feel sorry for the Lll," Oscar said. "I am one, remember."

Jo watched himself begin to climb the steps again, carrying his own confusion. "I feel sorry for her," Jo said.

"Enough to join the army?" Oscar said.

"Jhup," Jo said. "Yes."

"I had hoped so."

As they stepped out of the upper door and onto the street again, Jo squinted in the light. "Ni Ty," he said after a moment. "He said he'd come to speak to San Severina a few days ago."

Oscar nodded.

"Here? He saw her like this?"

Oscar nodded again.

"Then he's done this too," Jo said. He started down the street. "I hope he made the sun."

• • • •

"They couldn't put her to sleep with something or maybe hypnotize her?" Jo mused, staring through the glass wall back in the console room.

"When she goes to sleep, the Lll cease building," the Lump explained. "It's part of the

contract. Ownership must be conscious ownership at all times, for the Lll to function."

"That's what I'd more or less figured. How can you even be sure she's conscious inside that . . . beast? Can anybody get through to her?"

"That beast is *her* protection," Lump explained. "Are you ready to leave?"

"As much as I'll ever be."

"Then I want you to take a complex statement with you that is further in need of multiplex evaluation: The only important elements in any society are the artistic and the criminal, because they alone, by questioning the society's values, can force it to change."

"Is that true?"

"I don't know. I haven't evaluated it multiplexually. But let me say, further, that you are going to change a society. You haven't got the training that, say, Ni Ty has to do it artistically."

"I'm already with you, Lump," Jo said. "Lump, where's the army going, anyway?"

"Empire Star," Lump told him. "Have you any idea what your first criminal action is going to be?"

Jo paused a moment. "Well, up until you told me what our destination was, it was going to be going AWOL. Now I'm not so sure."

"Good," Lump said. "Good-bye, Jo."

"Good-bye."

eleven

Almost immediately Jo decided he did not like the army. He had been on the ten-mile spaceship for three minutes, milling around with the other recruits, when Prince Nactor strode by. As the recruits stepped back, Prince Nactor saw Di'k. The devil-kitten was kicking his legs in the air and chirping. As Jo went to pick him up, Prince Nactor said, "Is that yours?"

"Yes, sir," Jo said.

"Well, you can't bring that aboard."

"Of course, sir," Jo said. "I'll take care of it right away."

With his expanded vision, there was no problem locating someplace on that battleship where he could hide Di'k. It had been reconverted a few years back, and a lot of the old equipment had been removed, to be replaced by more compact components. The old view-chamber which had housed the direct-contact photo-regenerator had been done away with, and the compartment on the glass-walled hull had been first used as storage for things that would never be needed, then sealed up.

Jo slipped away, swiped a croten-wrench from the maintenance cabinet, and found the sealed hatchway. He wrenched off the stripping, shooed Di'k through into the darkness, started to close the door, but got an idea. He went back up to maintenance, took an alphabetic stencil, a can of yellow paint, and a brush. Back at the hatch he lettered onto the door:

AUTHORIZED ENTRANCE

FOR J-O PERSONS

ONLY

He got back upstairs in time to be issued uniform and equipment. The quartermaster demanded his allowance card. Jo explained that he didn't have one. The quartermaster went to chew out the control computer. Jo went back down to the hatch and walked in. There was a small hallway, and the top of his yellow head brushed the ceiling and got dusty. Then he heard music.

He'd heard an instrument like that, a long time ago, back when he'd been a shuttle-bum. Ron's guitar. Only this was a guitar played differently, much faster. And the voice—he'd never heard a voice like that. It was slow, and rich as his ocarina.

He waited, tempted to look and see, but resisted. He heard the song through once, and the melody repeated, so he took his instrument and began to play with the singing. The singing stopped; the guitar stopped. Jo played to the end of the melody, then stepped out.

She was sitting on the floor in front of a pile of crystal blocks. The glass wall of the spaceship let in the white light of Tantamount. She looked up from her guitar, and the face—it was a beautiful face, fine-featured, dark, with heavy brown hair that fell to one shoulder—twisted in silent terror.

"What are you doing?" Jo asked.

She backed against the wall of crystal blocks, her hand flat on the blond face of the guitar, fingers sliding across the wood and leaving paths of glimmer on the varnish.

"Have you seen Di'k?" Jo asked. "A devil-kitten about so big, eight legs, horns? Came in about fifteen minutes ago?"

She shook her head hard, a violence in the motion that told him the negation was general and not connected with his particular question.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Just then Di'k stepped out from behind the crystal blocks, pranced in front of the girl, lay on his back, kicked his legs in the air, meowed, stuck his tongue out, and was, in short, perfectly engaging. Jo reached out and scratched Di'k's belly with his bare toe. He was still naked from the induction physical, and his uniform was over his arm.

The girl was wearing a white blouse that came up around her neck, and a dark skirt that came just below her knees. Whatever frightened her about him seemed to be behind his uniform, because she stared at it as though she were trying to see through it. He could see in the shifting muscles of her face, the thoughts becoming more confused.

"I like your singing," Jo said. "You shouldn't be afraid. My name's Jo. What are you doing here?"

Suddenly she clamped her eyes, let the guitar fall face down in her lap, and clapped her hands on her ears. "Singing," she said quickly. "I'm just singing. Singing's the most

important thing there is, you know. I'm not hurting anybody. No, don't say anything more to me. I refuse to answer any questions."

"You look pretty confused," Jo said. "Do you want to ask any?"

She shook her head, then hunched it down between her shoulders as if to avoid a blow.

Jo frowned, moved his mouth to one side of his face, then the other. He chewed the inside of his lip and said at last, "I don't believe you're really that simplex." She just crouched farther back against the crystal blocks. "You know, I'm not really a soldier."

She looked up. "Then why do you have the uniform?"

"See! You just asked one."

"Oh!" She sat up and put her hand over her mouth.

"I have the uniform because I came very close to being a soldier. I only have to wear it when I go outside. If it frightens you, I'll put it away." He tossed it over the crystal pile. The girl lowered her shoulders and visibly relaxed. "You're hiding from the soldiers," Jo said slowly. "If they find you, you'd prefer they thought you were simplex. Are you going to Empire Star too?"

She nodded.

"Who are you?"

She picked up the guitar. "I'd rather not say. It's not that I don't trust you. But the fewer people on this battleship who know, the better."

"All right. But would you answer another one, then?"

"Yes. All these soldiers under Prince Nactor are going to Empire Star to kill me, unless I get there first."

"That's not the answer to the question I was going to ask."

She looked dreadfully embarrassed.

"But I guess it's a pretty good one." Jo smiled.

She reached out to scratch Di'k's belly. "Someday I'll learn how to do that answer-before-you're-asked bit. It's so impressive when it comes off. I thought you were going to ask what this was all about."

Jo looked puzzled. Then he laughed. "You're hiding from the soldiers by staying under their noses! Very multiplex! Very multiplex!" He lowered himself cross-legged to the floor on the other side of Di'k.

"Also, if I go with them, it's fairly certain I won't get there *after* they do. At worst we'll arrive at the same time." She pursed her mouth. "But I've got to contrive some way to get there first."

Jo scratched Di'k too, and their fingers touched knuckles. He grinned. "Only I was going to ask you where you were coming from. I know where you're going and where you are now."

"Oh," she said. "Do you know Miss Perrypicker's?"

"Who?"

"Where. Miss Perrypicker's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies."

"What's that?"

"That's where I come from. It's a perfectly dreadful place where basically nice girls are taken from the best families and taught how to appear so simplex you wouldn't believe it."

"I didn't believe *you,"* Jo said.

She laughed. "I'm one of Miss Perrypicker's failures. I suppose there's a lot there to enjoy—tennis, antigrav volleyball, water polo, four-walled handball—which is my favorite—and three-D chess. A few teachers did slip in who actually knew something. But singing and playing the guitar, which is what I really like to do, I picked up on my own."

"You do it very well."

"Thanks." She pulled from the strings a descending run of chords, opened her lips, and ejected a melody that rose on slow, surprising intervals that plucked sympathetic strings of pleasure, nostalgia, and joy that Jo had not felt since he had sung for the Lll.

She stopped. "That's a song the Lll made. It's one of my favorites."

"It's beautiful," Jo said blinking. "Go on, please. Sing the rest."

"That's all there is," she said. "Very short. Just those six notes. It does what it has to do, then stops. Everything that Lll make is very economical."

"Oh," Jo said. The melody was like a rainbow slick over his mind, calming, spreading.

"I'll sing anoth—"

"No," Jo said. "Let me just think about that one awhile."

She smiled and dropped her hand, silent, over the strings.

Jo's hand meandered over Di'k's stomach. The devil-kitten was snoring softly. "Tell me," Jo said, "why does Prince Nactor want to kill you at Empire Star?"

"My father is very ill," she explained. "I was called home suddenly from Miss Perrypicker's because it looks like he's going to die any day. When he does, I shall inherit the reins of the Empire—if I'm there. If not, Prince Nactor will seize them. We've been racing each other all the way."

"You're a princess of the Empire?"

She nodded.

"You must be pretty important," Jo said wonderingly.

"I won't be anything if I don't beat Nactor. He's been waiting for this for years."

"Why should you have them and not Nactor?"

"For one thing, I'm going to free the Lll. Prince Nactor wants to keep them under his protection."

"I see." He nodded and hugged his knees. "How are you going to do this, and why won't Nactor?"

"Economics," the girl said. "I have the support of the twenty-six richest men in the Empire. They trust me to deal with the matter multiplexually. They are waiting at Empire Star to hear what the outcome between myself and Nactor will be. They refuse to support Nactor, and all he's left with is the army. Although he is quite a multiplex man, he only

has the one tool of force to pry with. If you only have one direction in which you can push, you might as well be simplex, whether you want to be or not. So they await me, assembled in the brass-columned council chamber, while the tessellations of the stained-glass windows cast their many shadows on the blue tiles, and somewhere in a crystal bed, my father lies dying . . .”

“Jhup,” said Jo, impressed.

“I’ve never been there. I read about it in a novel by Muels Aranlyde. We all read his political trilogy at Miss Perrypicker’s. Do you know his work?”

Jo shook his head. “Only . . .”

“Yes?”

“I think I have a message for them, there in the council chamber.”

“You do?”

“That’s why I’m going to Empire Star. I have a message to deliver, and I think I must be fairly close to delivering it.”

“What is it?”

Jo let go of his knees now. “You’re not anxious to tell me who you are; I think I’d best keep my message to myself until I get to the council chamber.”

“Oh.” She tried to look content, but curiosity kept struggling to the surface of her face.

“I’ll tell you this,” Jo said, half-smiling. “It concerns the Lll.”

“Oh,” she repeated, more slowly. Suddenly she rose up on her knees, leaning over her guitar. “Look, I’ll make a deal with you! You can’t get into the council chamber without my help—”

“Why not?”

“Nobody can. The great iris of energy that guards the chamber only opens to twenty-eight mind patterns—you better read up on it in your Aranlyde. Twenty-six of them are inside already. My father’s dying, and I doubt if his is still recognizable. So there’s just me left. I’ll help you get into the council chamber if you help me beat Prince Nactor.”

“All right,” Jo said. “All right. That’s fair. What sort of help do you need?”

“Well,” she said, sitting back down. “You’ve got that uniform, so you can sneak in and out of here.”

Jo nodded and waited for her to go on.

But she shrugged. Then looked questioningly. “That’s something, isn’t it?”

“You mean I have to figure out the rest,” Jo said. “I’ll try. What sort of help have you had already?”

“I’ve got a small computer running interference for me.”

“I may be small,” a voice said from beneath Jo’s uniform where it lay over the piled blocks, “but I haven’t reached my full growth yet.”

“Huh?” Jo said.

“That’s a Lump,” the girl said. “He’s a linguistic—”

“—ubiquitous multiplex,” Jo finished. “Yeah. I’ve met one before.” For the first time he realized that the haphazard crystals were logic-blocks. But there were surprisingly

few. He'd been used to seeing them organized over the sixty-foot wall in the console room.

"It was his idea to hide out in the battleship."

Jo nodded, then stood. "Maybe," Jo said, "if everybody works together, we can muddle through this thing. Though I have a feeling it's going to be a little confusing. Say, one thing I've been meaning to ask. What planet around Empire Star are we going to?"

The girl looked very surprised.

"Well, we're not going inside the star itself, are we?"

Lump said, "I don't think he knows. You really should read Aranlyde."

"I guess he doesn't know," she said, and bit at a knuckle. "Should I tell him?"

"Let me."

"You mean people *do* live in the star?"

"People could," Lump said. "The surface temperature of Aurigae is less than two thousand degrees Fahrenheit. It's a very dim star, and it shouldn't be difficult to devise a refrigeration plant to bring that down to a reasonable—"

"They don't live inside," the girl said. "But there are no planets around Aurigae."

"Then where—"

"Let me. Please," the Lump repeated. "Aurigae is not only the largest star in the galaxy —hundreds of times the mass of Sol, thousands of times as big. But it is not just simply a star—"

"It's more complicated—" the girl began.

"Multiplicated," Lump said. "Aurigae has been known to be an eclipsing binary for ages. But there are at least seven giant stars—giant compared to Sol—doing a rather difficult, but beautiful, dance around one another out there."

"All around one point," the girl said. "That point is the center of Empire."

"The still point," said Lump, "in the turning world. That's an allusion. It's the gravitational center of that vast multiplex of matter. It's also the center of the Empire's power."

"It's the origin of the reins of Empire," the girl said.

"Can you imagine the incredible strain both space and time are subjected to at that point? The fibers of reality are parted there. The temporal present joins the spatial past there with the possible future, and they get totally mixed up. Only the most multiplex of minds can go there and find their way out again the same way they went in. One is always arriving on Wednesday and coming out again on Thursday a hundred years ago and a thousand light years away."

"It's a temporal and spatial gap," the girl explained. "The council controls it, and that's how it keeps its power. I mean, if you can go into the future to see what's going to happen, then go into the past to make sure it happens like you want it, then you've just about got the universe in your pocket, more or less."

"More or less," Jo said. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen," the girl said.

"Two years younger than I am," said Jo. "And how many times have you been through the gap at Empire Star?"

"Never," she said, surprised. "This is the first time I've ever been away from Miss Perrypicker's. I've only read about it."

Jo nodded. "Tell me—" he pointed toward the pile of logic-blocks—"is Lump there based on a Lll consciousness?"

"I say—" began the Lump.

"You know, you're really very gauche," the girl announced, straightening. "What possible difference could that make to you—"

"It doesn't," Jo said. He sighed. "Only I think this has all happened before. I also think I have a lot of things to tell you."

"What things?"

"What's he talking about?" Lump asked.

"Listen," Jo said. "It's going to take a bit longer to free the Lll than you think right now. You're going to have to undergo the unbearable sadness of Lll ownership yourself —"

"Oh, I would never own a—"

"You will," Jo said sadly. "You'll own more than anyone else has ever owned. That's probably the only way you will be able to free them." Jo shook his head. "There will be a war, and a lot of what you hold most beautiful and important will be destroyed."

"Oh, a war! With who?"

Jo shrugged. "Perhaps Prince Nactor."

"Oh, but even with war, I wouldn't—Oh, Lump, you know I wouldn't ever—"

"Many people will be killed. The economics will be such, I imagine, that the council and you will decide that purchasing the Lll is the only way to rebuild. And you will. You will have a great deal of sadness and worse to carry, both of you. But a long time from now, while what I am telling you about now is happening, you will run into a boy." Jo glanced at his reflection on the glass. "I was going to say that he looks like me. But he doesn't, not that much. His eyes—well, he doesn't have this glass thing in place of his right eye. His hands—he'll have claws on his left. He'll be a lot browner than I am because he's spent more time outside than I have recently. His speech will be almost unintelligible. Though his hair will be about the color of mine, it will be much longer and a mess—" Suddenly Jo reached for his pouch and dug inside. "Here. Keep this, until you meet him. Then give it to him." He handed her the red comb.

"I'll keep it," she said, puzzled. She turned it around to look at it. "If he speaks all that poorly, I can give him diction lessons in Interling. Miss Perrypicker was a real fanatic about diction."

"I know you can," Jo said. "Both of you, remember me, and when he comes to you, try and make him as much like me as you can. Here, you'll recognize him this way." He pointed to Di'k. "He'll have one of these for a pet. He'll be going to Empire Star like we are now, only by then you'll be going someplace else. He'll have a message to deliver,

but he won't know what it is. He's very unsure of himself, and he won't understand how you can bring yourself to own such incredible creatures as the Lll."

"But *I* don't understand how—"

"By then you will," Jo said. "Reassure him. Tell him he'll learn what his message is by the time he has to deliver it. He's a very insecure little boy."

"You don't make him sound very attractive."

Jo shrugged. "Perhaps by then your band of sensitivity will be broader. There'll be something about him—"

"You know," she said suddenly, looking up from the comb, "I think *you're* a very beautiful boy!" Then self-surprise and modesty contended for possession of her smile.

Jo broke out laughing.

"I didn't mean to . . . Oh, I'm sorry if I said any—"

"No!" Jo rolled back on the floor. "No, that's all right!" He kicked his feet in the air. "No, everything's perfectly all right." He rolled back to a sitting position. Then his laughter stopped.

She had twined her hands together, catching a fold of her skirt.

"I didn't mean to laugh at you," Jo said.

"It's not that."

He leaned forward. "Then tell me what it is."

"It's just that—well, since I left Miss Perrypicker's the weirdest things have been happening to me. And everybody I run into seems to know a bleb of a lot more about what's going on than I do."

". . . bleb?"

"Oh, dear. I didn't mean to say that either. Miss Perrypicker would have a fit."

"Eh . . . what exactly is *bleb?"*

She giggled and involuntarily hushed her voice as she leaned toward him. "It's what all the girls at Miss Perrypicker's *pick!"*

Jo nodded. "I get the general idea. You haven't been multiplex very long, have you?"

"I haven't. And up until a few weeks ago"—she pointed to Lump—"he was called Lusp."

"Really," Lump said, "you don't have to tell him *everything."*

"That's all right," Jo said. "I understand."

"I've been having so many adventures since I got started. And they all come out so weird."

"What sort of adventures?" Jo asked. "Tell me about them."

"The last thing was on the ship I was on before that one—I didn't have to hide there—there was a shuttle-bum who I was giving Interling lessons to. It turned out he had written the most marvelous poems. They completely changed my life, I think—sounds rather melodramatic, I know, and I suppose you wouldn't understand how. But anyway, he introduced me to Lump. Lump was a friend of his before he was a Lump. Lump says he got the idea of hiding in the battleship from him. Apparently an army had been after *this*

boy, too, once, and—"

"Ni Ty had done it before?"

"How did you know his name?"

"I'm familiar with his poems," Jo said. "I understand how they changed your life. He lets you know how much of your life is yours and how much belongs to history."

"Yes. Yes, that's exactly how it struck me!" She looked into her lap. "And if you're a princess of the Empire, so much belongs to history there's hardly any left for you."

"Sometimes—" he reached into his pouch and took out his ocarina—"even if you're not. Play with me."

"All right," she said, and picked up her guitar.

They made a soft, climbing melody. Beyond the glass wall night sped by. It might as well have been still and listening, as the youngsters made their music and their ship hove forward.

"You look at me," she said at last, "as though you know so much about me. Are you reading my mind?"

Jo shook his head. "Just simplex, complex, and multiplex."

"You speak as though you know, too."

"I know that Lump there was based on Muels Aranlyde's consciousness."

She turned "Lump . . . you didn't tell me!"

"I didn't know. Ni Ty didn't tell me. He just told me I was Lll-based. He didn't say *which* Lll."

"And you're San Severina."

She whirled back. "But you said before that you didn't know—"

"And now I say I do."

"As time progresses," Lump stated, "people learn. That's the only hope."

Through the battleship wall the dark and flaming masses of the multiplex system of Empire Star were just visible.

San Severina went to the wall and leaned her cheek against the glass. "Jo, have you ever been through the time gap at Empire Star? Maybe that's why you know so much about the future."

"No. But you're going to."

She raised her head, and her eyes widened. "Oh, you'll come with me, won't you? I'd be scared to go alone!"

She touched his shoulder.

"Jo, do you know whether we'll win or not?"

"I only know that, win or lose, it will take longer than we think."

Her hand slipped down his arm and seized his. "But you will help me! You *will* help!"

He raised his hands and placed both of them on her shoulders. Her hand came up with his. "I'll help you," he said. Empire Star drew nearer. "Of course I'll help you, San Severina. How could I refuse after what you've done for me?"

"What have I done?" she asked, puzzled again.

"Shhh," he said and touched her lips with a finger. "If you ask questions that nobody can answer, you just have to wait and see."

Di'k hiccuped in his sleep, and Lump coughed discreetly. They turned to look at Empire Star again, and, from the protective socket of bone and flesh, I too looked, and saw much further.

I'm Jewel.

twelve

The multiplex reader has by now discovered that the story is much longer than she thinks, cyclic and self-illuminating. I must leave out a great deal; only order your perceptions multiplexually, and you will not miss the lacunae.

No end at all! I hear from one complex voice.

Unfair. Look at the second page. There I told you that there was an end and that Di'k, myself, and the ocarina were with him till then.

A tile for the mosaic?

Here's a piece. The end came sometime after San Severina (after many trips through the gap), bald, wrinkled, injured, healed, and aged a hundred years, was allowed to give up her sovereignty and with it her name and a good many of her more painful memories. She took a great 3-Dog for her companion and the name Charona and retired to a satellite called Rhys, where for five hundred years she had nothing more taxing to do than guard the gate of the Transport Area and be kind to children, which suited her old age.

Another tile? *Bleb* is water, picked drop by drop from the leaves of lile-ferns at dawn by the girls of Miss Perrypicker's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies.

Oh, I could tell you good news and bad, of successes and defeats. Prince Nactor waged a war that charred eight worlds, destroyed fifty-two civilizations and thirty-two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven complete and distinct ethical systems, a small defeat. A great victory, now: Prince Nactor, through a chain of circumstances I leave you to deduce, fear-crazed, clammy with sweat, fled at midnight through the jungles of Central Park on Earth when Di'k yawned, emerged from behind a clump of trees, and stepped on him, quite by accident—Di'k having gained by then his adult size of fifty feet.

I have told you how San Severina, aged and bald and called Charona, first taught the child, Comet Jo, about simplex, complex, and multiplex under a place called Brooklyn Bridge on a satellite called Rhys. As well I could tell you how Jo, as old and as wrinkled and then called Norn, first taught the child San Severina the song they played together in the abandoned chamber of a battleship, on a world unnamed in this story so far—under a place called Brooklyn Bridge.

I could tell you how, at the final emancipation of the Lll, when the crowds silenced before the glorious music, a man named Ron, who as a boy had himself sung for the Lll while a shuttle-bum, tears quivering in the corners of his eyes, his throat half-blocked with emotion, both then and now, turned to the Lll standing next to him in the tremendous

crush of people and whispered (indicating not only the straining attentions around him, and the incredible effect of the brief song, but as well the shattering culmination the emancipation represented) "Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

The Lll was silent, but the Oriental youngster standing by him shot back with shocking, subdued rage, "Yeah. *I* have!" and then to the Lll, "Come *on,* Muels, let's get *out* of here, huh?" and the Lll and the boy began to push their way toward the edge of the crowd, to begin a journey as incredible as the one I have recounted, while Ron stayed there, open-mouthed, incredulous at the sacrilege.

A joyous defeat: When Prince Nactor burned Jo's body on the ice-blasted plains of the planet that circled Tantamount joyous, because it freed Jo to be able to use many other bodies, many other names.

A tragic victory: When the Lump destroyed Prince Nactor's mind, only a few hours before the incident with Di'k in Central Park, by crashing his full growth—several times as big as we have seen him to date—into the Geodesic Survey Station, where Nactor had secreted his brain in an ivory egg flushed with nutrient fluid deep within the station—tragic, because the Lump too was finally destroyed in the collision.

Or I can tell you the very end, happening at the same time as the very beginning, when at last someone *had* come to free the Lll, and Comet Jo—still called Norn, then—Ki, Marbika, and myself were bringing the message from S. Doradus to Empire Star in an organiform, when suddenly the encysting mechanism broke down and we went out of control. As the rest of us fought to save the ship, I turned for a moment and saw Norn standing at the front, staring out at the glittering sun at which we hurtled. He had begun to laugh.

Struggling to pull us back on course, I demanded, "And just what's so funny?"

He shook his head slowly, without looking away. "Did you ever read any of the poems of Ni Ty Lee, Jewel?"

As I said, this was at the beginning, and I hadn't yet. I wasn't crystallized then, either. "This is no time to discuss literature!" I shouted—even though a moment before the breakdown, he'd been patiently listening for hours as I had detailed a book I was intending to write.

Ki came swimming through the proto-photoplasm. "I don't think there's anything we can do." The light through the greenish jelly gleamed on his fear-stained face.

I looked back at Norn, who still hadn't moved, as the blot of illumination spread over the darkness. The laughter had stopped, and tears glistened on his face.

"There's a satellite," Marbika cried from the interior darkness. "Maybe we can crash-land—"

We did.

On a place called Rhys where there was nothing but a one-product simplex society with a Transport Area.

They died. I was the only one able to go on, though Norn gave the message over to someone else to carry, and I went with them to see that it was delivered—

Or have I told you this part of the story before?

I doubt it.

In this vast multiplex universe there are almost as many satellites called Rhys as there are places called Brooklyn Bridge. It's a beginning. It's an end. I leave to you the problem of ordering your perceptions and making the journey from one to the other.

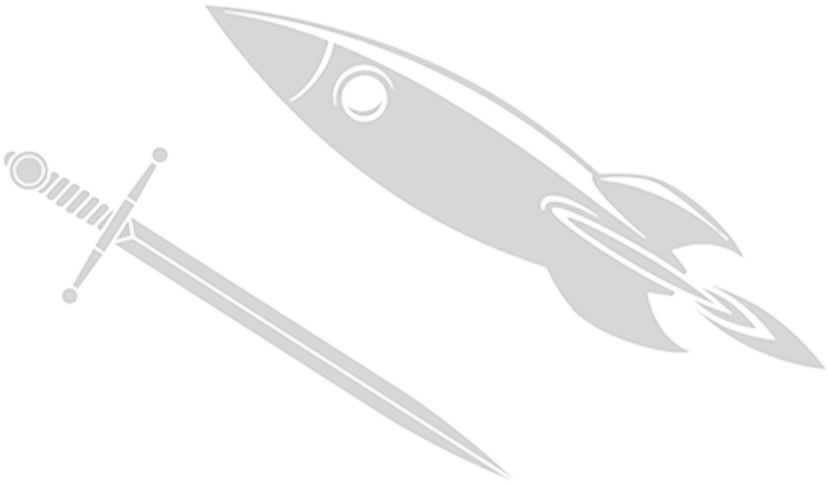
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samuel R. "Chip" Delany is an author, professor, and literary critic. Born in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, he spent time living in San Francisco and London before returning to New York City, where he currently resides. He finished his first novel at 19 years old, and had published short fiction by age 20. Though he does not possess a degree, Delany was a professor at several universities from 1988 to his retirement in 2015. He has won four Nebula Awards and two Hugo Awards, along with many other honors. He was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 2002, and named a Grandmaster by SFWA in 2013.

EXCERPT

PRESENTED BY TOR BOOKS



NOVEL EXCERPT: *Infomocracy* (Tor Books)

Malka Older | 3,350 words

Chapter 1

The sign on the defunct pachinko parlor proclaims 21st century, but the style—kanji in neon outlined in individual lightbulbs? Who does that?—suggests it was named at a time when that was a bold look toward the future, not a statement of fact that has been accurate for more than sixty years. As Ken watches the sign draw closer and closer on his dashboard, he wonders whether the place closed as a consequence of gambling becoming illegal when that canton split off from what used to be Japan, or whether it was a function of its location on a nameless stretch of highway between two tiny towns, one of which no longer exists. He doesn't care enough to check. What is important is that it is closed, and likely to remain so, and unlikely to be watched.

He gets a shock as an old-fashioned bicycle toodles by the building on his display, the rider a cocoon of parkas and scarves. It's a live feed? Ken cares enough to check on that but is reassured to find that the camera has been focused there for almost three years, apparently in response to teenagers joyriding in search of ghosts. Ken shrugs mentally; he'll have to hope no one who knows enough to pay attention to him is watching. The odds are pretty good, given how many feeds there are out there and how few people know they should be interested in his actions.

After months of campaign research in dense potential domino centenals, the solitude out here is putting Ken on edge. It's a strange place to meet that happened to be convenient for both him and his contact. He took the ferry over from Korea to the west coast of Japan. The plan was just to pass through Akita on his way here, but he was able to get in a few quick lay-of-the-land surveys and shoot them up the hierarchy in case they either prove to be useful or get someone to notice his initiative and hustle. Akita felt so remote and unnoticed that he broke character a little and went beyond data gathering to do some actual campaigning, but he doubts it had any effect. The same reasons that made it safe made it useless: the people he talked to were callused old farmers and fishermen who believe the election is local and vote for whatever party co-opts their traditional leaders. He tried to suggest to them that the Supermajority was important, that it could be their centenal that decided it, but it wasn't even that they disbelieved him. They just didn't care.

In Akita, he rented a mini-motor and crossed Honshu to the eastern coast, following the old high-speed rail tracks that cut straight across the country until his maximum-utility path deviated from them and he had to pull off onto narrow, well-maintained roads in what was clearly the middle of nowhere.

Sure, it's not one of those centenals in the Gobi Desert or the Australian Outback where the hundred thousand citizens are scattered over hundreds of empty miles. There

are towns here, tiny shrunken ones that show up as dots on his map projection, almost lost within the erratic, widely spaced centenal borders. Ken breezes through a couple on his way: white houses with grey slate roofs pitched to let the snow slide off, isolated shops with antiquated signs lit from within advertising Pocari Sweat or Boss coffee. Heavy grey clouds make the sky darker than the snowy ground, but it's still technically daytime, and most of the light in the towns comes from glowing Information hubs doubling as vending machines. He stops to get a can of coffee at one, his Information visuals projecting translations and explanations next to the product descriptions. Then he roars off, and from there it's just road and sharp slopes covered with trees. Even Information has little to say here.

Ken pulls his mini-motor off the road well outside camera range of the feed he was watching and walks the rest of the way. Bundled as he is against the winter's edge, he won't be recognizable on a feed of that resolution. If anyone happens to be watching they'll think he's some local farmer, stepping into the run-down building for a respite from the cold.

Not an undercover political operative slipping in for a meeting he doesn't want anyone to know about.

Despite not wanting to be visible any longer than necessary, Ken finds his steps slowing as he nears the pachinko parlor. Below the deadened pink neon of the sign, the building is a fading, windowless grey. The smoked-glass door was once automatic, and Ken has to struggle to edge it open. The scant light that makes it into the entrance hallway dies mired in the moldy plush carpet. The next door, only a few steps away, must once have swung open easily to welcome gamblers, but as Ken pushes it, his sleeve wrapped around his hand to avoid touching the crude and dusty alloy of the handle, it stutters along the floor before finally giving in with a screech.

Which is when Ken gets his second unpleasant surprise of the day. Despite his arrival a clean two hours early, his contact got there first.

• • • •

"You don't *vote?"* The girl's tone rises with the incredulity of someone who has sucked up every mag article and vidlet about this being the event of the decade, the election of the century, the most important vote yet, a chance to change the established order, blah blah blah blah blah. Her echo chamber of friends and rivals does not include nonvoters. She's come to this supposed voter registration rally not only because it's the best party on tonight in the greater Rio de la Plata area, but also because it feels like virtuous pleasure, an exciting civic duty with a built-in conversation starter. In sum: a semi-sentient being experiencing the first election she can vote in.

"Nah," Domaine says, taking a toke. "Why? Do you?"

Girl laughs. "Of course! I'm already registered. Why wouldn't you vote? I mean, in this election, we really have a chance to change things. Your vote could be the one to

make the difference."

"How do you know whom I would vote for?" Domaine asks. "Your vote and my vote might cancel each other out."

She's still smiling, maybe because his voice has a way of making that sound like a sexy proposition, or maybe because of the alcohol and weed, the mild summer air of the dark night, and the sounds of the electric accordion from the stage. "Somehow, I don't think so," she giggles, which makes Domaine want to gag, but he keeps his game face on. "Anyway, the important thing is that you vote. It's all about participation."

Yes, it's all about participation. No matter who wins or loses, as long as everyone plays the game. Never mind that half of Buenos Aires belongs to Liberty and is likely to continue to, and the other half has its head up its denialist ass and consistently votes itself into what's left of the European Union. All this surrounded by a checkerboard of populist and regionalist governments in the provinces, few of them with any centenals outside the southern cone.

"How do you know whom to vote for?" Domaine asks. The girl's wearing an oil-slick dress, and it reflects the glow of the string of lightbulbs swinging above the outdoor bar like fires on the water.

"That's what Information is for," she says, giggling again. Which is what Domaine has been waiting for.

"Really? And where do you get your—"

"An afro that big has *got* to say something about sexual potency."

Domaine snaps his head around, brushing the incipient ideologue with the edge of his 'do, to see an auburn-haired Asian woman at his right elbow.

"Mizzzzzz Mishima," he growls, feeling his pulse rate climb.

Mishima is also wearing black but in the thinnest of airy cottons, flowing around her body in a way that probably obscures a few concealed weapons. "Domaine. *Imagine* meeting you at this party."

Domaine is too busy imagining those weapons. He considers himself an eminently reconstructed male and is disturbed by how much those images arouse him. *Would you be turned on if she held a knife to your throat?* he asks himself. *Probably,* is the even more disturbing answer.

Voter girl is still talking. Domaine runs his right hand through his hair, giving it a subtle twitch by his ear. The magnet in his ring turns off his automatic interpreter, and her Lunfardo patter goes back to being unintelligible. He needs his mojo back. "Party?" he repeats, leaning toward Mishima. "Is that what this is?"

She smiles with dark-crimsoned lips, looks around. "Live music, decorative lights, various recreational drugs," nodding at the joint between Domaine's fingers. "Looks like a party to me."

"Ah," Domaine takes a long pull from his blunt, as though he had forgotten it was there. "I must have been misinformed. I thought it was a voter motivation drive."

"I suppose they might be multitasking," Mishima says. "You looking to sign up?"

“Baby, you can motivate me any time,” Domaine rumbles. He pretends to think about it for a moment. “I wouldn’t have to actually vote though, would I?”

“No, Domaine, you don’t have to do anything at all,” Mishima says, turning away into the crowd. She’s gotten word in her earpiece: they checked him out and found nothing in a long-distance body scan or the records of his recent movements to suggest he’s planning violence. Maybe it’s her narrative disorder acting up again.

But before she can take a step a deep rushing noise builds over the notes of the alt-tango. Mishima swings back around. Domaine has turned too, although she doesn’t realize it at first because his head is silhouetted in the glow of the huge flaming letters rising above the park, igniting one by one:

WP = DICTADOR.

Domaine laughs with glee and spins back to Mishima, but she has already propelled past him in the direction of the fiery libel.

• • • •

It is so dim inside the old pachinko parlor that it takes Ken several seconds to make out the gun. He edges past the sticky glass door, blinking at the dust and the rows of silent slot machines, which his Information is busy annotating with release date, model, and largest jackpot at this location. Fortunately, Ken is practiced at ignoring the scrawl projected onto his vision. He takes another cautious step, then stops short as more faint light creeps in from the entrance behind him, glinting off something just ahead.

The metal tip of an arrowhead. Ken raises his eyes to find the face behind it. And lets his breath out slowly. He’s still not sure he isn’t dead, but at least he knows the person who’s aiming a spear gun at him.

“Amuru-san,” Ken says, slowly and clearly. He raises his hands, also slowly, to unwrap the scarf and push back his hood. “At last we meet in person.”

Amuru grunts but does not lower the gun. “You are early.”

“Clearly not early enough,” Ken answers, hands hovering around his collarbones. He feels like he should unzip his coat to allow for freer range of motion in case this does get physical, but the temperature in here is not much of an improvement over outside. “Can I provide you with some reassurance as to my identity?”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Amuru says, but he waits an extra beat before sliding the spear away from Ken and setting the gun down on top of a long-obsolete change machine close at hand. “This is, after all, a friendly exchange of information. Two friends talking about politics from their respective viewpoints a few weeks before an election.” Nothing in his face or tone changes to make it feel friendlier than a holdup.

“Indeed.” Ken is impressed by the spear gun: an unorthodox weapon, sure, but both legal and lethal. That the person holding it is from Okinawa gives it additional credibility. He takes a cautious step forward. “Perhaps you could start by describing to me the situation as it stands in the Ryukyus?”

Amuru nods. He's wearing a dark-blue parka, fur from the lined hood peeking around his collar, but now that Ken is closer he can see the man's large brown feet crossed by the black thongs of plastic flip-flops.

"It could be worse. As usual, we have a couple of centenals that are sure for your side, and others divided among the various corporates. 1China will not do well; the centenals that went with her last time are disappointed and somewhat open to new suggestions."

"We'll have a fairly open field there?"

"It is possible that the opportunity has gone unnoticed. But there may be others, like me, helping others, like you."

Ken nods. Obviously, there will be. Policy1st is hardly the first government to try to campaign without broadcasting its strategy. "You said you'd bring a breakdown of the key issues in these areas?"

Amuru casts a projection up with a detailed map of the islands and pulls out notes for each centenal, detailing their political, socioeconomic, and cultural characteristics as well as recent events or trends that might affect voting. It's professionally done, and Ken is pleased although not surprised. Policy1st tends to attract people with a grasp of the issues and of what's at stake. Every centenal, every collection of one hundred thousand neighbors, matters, whether it is spread over hundreds of miles in the tundra or crammed into a couple of overdeveloped blocks in Dhaka.

"And there on that coast, there's something going on with the shoreline. They've had a lot of erosion there recently; I don't know what the cause is but it's a big concern for everyone.

"Also, that's where the American base was for decades. Even though it's been gone almost as long, they still remember it, so you have to be very careful with anything that suggests it even remotely, anything that reminds people about colonialism or militarism in any form."

Ken is listening, nodding, recording everything. He has his own detailed map of the Ryukyus open, the projection glowing brighter than usual in the dusty, dim air between them, and is adjusting the color coding on the centenals the Okinawan is mentioning and adding notes of his own.

"The thing you should know, though," Amuru goes on, "Liberty is making a serious push."

"Sou desu ka?"

"Yeah. Not so much with the 1China centenals; more with the Ryukyu nationalists. They've been telling people, quietly, that if enough of Okinawa's centenals go to them and they become the Supermajority, they'll annex what's left of Japan."

Ken's eyebrows shoot up. "They said that?"

Amuru nods slowly, then adds, "Peacefully. They always say 'annex peacefully.'"

What does that even mean, "annex peacefully"? Ken's grasp of twentieth-century history is dim, and he can't find an analogy. "Don't people realize they're not seriously going to do it?" he asks. "I mean, they *can't* be serious."

“Does that matter?” Amuru points out. “If they gain ground in Okinawa but do not become the Supermajority, no one will expect them to keep the promise, and you can be sure they will try to consolidate in the Ryukyus over the next decade.”

“And if they do win the Supermajority?” Ken knows he shouldn’t even suggest the possibility. Campaigning 101 includes never admitting that an opponent’s victory is even conceivable, but he’s off balance.

“Maybe they will do what they claim,” Amuru says. His eyes drop from Ken’s. “That promise, of annexing Japan and especially Satsuma—it is still very powerful for us.”

“More powerful than micro-democracy? More powerful than peace?”

“Micro-democracy has brought winners and losers in the Ryukyus, like everywhere else,” Amuru answers. “As for peace . . .” He shrugs, and fires off a four-character adage that Ken’s not familiar with. It seems to suggest peace without justice isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Or peace without vengeance. The phrasing is ambiguous.

“Has it been recorded? This—” Threat? Promise? “—slogan?”

Amuru shrugs. “Wouldn’t you know that better than I do?” Ken is too busy composing an urgent message in his head to answer, and Amuru presses his advantage. “Let’s see your globe.”

Ken expected that, expected it enough to prepare the globe he wants Amuru to see and store it in a special filepath as though it were the only one, but he’s still surprised to be asked. He supposes, as he goes through the motions of opening the file under latest projections, that he expected more sophistication from someone who brought a spear gun to a data fight.

The globe he opens is purely speculative, and in most areas strategically optimistic, although their projections for mainland Japan are distinctly underplayed. The heavy spotting in China is possible but unlikely, and although Ken is hopeful for Java, it is still far too early and crowded there to be sure. As the globe spins, a darkened Middle East and Central Asia come into view, then a surprising amount of color through sub-Saharan Africa and—this much Ken feels is justified—large swathes of Europe, not just western. North America is its usual mostly bipolar patchwork, with isolated representation for Policy1st in some of the urban areas, and Latin America looks on this version like an intense battleground, pulsing dots in Caracas, Cartagena, Buenos Aires, and a dozen more cities showing voter events going on at that very moment.

Amuru must know that this can’t all be true, or at least not verified. Maybe he wants to know what Ken, and the government he represents, want him to see. Or maybe he wants to see anything at this point, any intel about the way this contest is going, any hint that he can take back to share with others or keep close for secret reassurance. One thing Ken has learned in this job: people like to think they know things, even the unknowable. Whatever he’s looking for, Amuru grunts as if he’s found it. “Ganbatte iru, ne,” he comments, which Ken takes as a positive reaction. It would be tough to convince people to vote for them if they didn’t think they were working hard. “It would help,” Amuru goes on, “if you gave us a *person* to vote for. Ideally someone photogenic and smooth-talking, like the others

have."

It isn't the first time Ken has gotten this request. "We want people to understand that they're choosing a set of policies and principles, a way of life, not a person. Of course," he adds as Amuru waves his hand, now alarmingly holding the spear gun, in annoyance, "we will have people representing us at the debates. Attractive, well-spoken people."

"People?" Amuru asks suspiciously.

"We will have different representatives at each of the debates," Ken explains, rewrapping his scarf. The older man, moving toward the door, leans close to Ken. "They have said that if they win, they will *peacefully* annex Japan. What do you think they will do to those centenals in Okinawa that belong to other governments, like yours?" His heavy eyes stare that idea into Ken's brain, and then he disappears into the cold. "Wait at least an hour before you follow me out!"

Ken shivers and finds a seat at a pachinko machine (a 2008 Evangelion Premium that once shelled out 28,830 yen to a lucky winner) to send off some heavily underlined messages and check the latest polls while he waits. At least he'll be out of here earlier than he expected. Sixteen days until the vote and one of the corporates is threatening war. There's a lot of work to do.

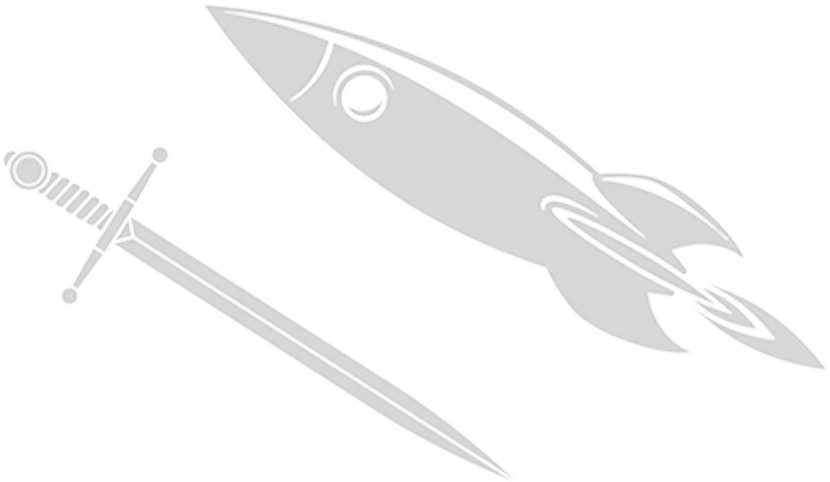
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malka Older is a writer, humanitarian worker, and Ph.D. candidate at the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations studying governance and disasters. Named Senior Fellow for Technology and Risk at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs for 2015, she has more than eight years of experience in humanitarian aid and development, and has responded to complex emergencies and natural disasters in Uganda, Darfur, Indonesia, Japan, and Mali. *Infomocracy* is her first novel.

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS

EDITED BY ARLEY SORG



Author Spotlight: Karin Lowachee

Nicasio Andres Reed

The two main characters of this story are both military veterans, one human and one android, one living as a civilian for some time and the other a recent discharge. How did you approach these two points of view on a shared history?

Even if I didn't show Mark's headspace specifically, I had to know what was going on for him in his silence and try to convey that through Tawn and what he gleaned and understood. I basically approached it as two men who share similar experiences and are able to find common ground. At the heart of the story to me is that sense of camaraderie between veterans that spans any divide created by age, specific war, gender . . . and in this case, human and android species.

Surviving trauma and living in the aftermath of trauma are themes that resonate through "A Good Home," and that I recognize from your excellent *Warchild* series as well. It's interesting that in this story, we explore the aftermath absent the traumatic events themselves. What inspired you to take this particular approach?

Thank you so much! I'm a little surprised how much *Warchild* has endured and I'm very grateful. In "A Good Home," I really wanted to show the aftermath. That it's an ongoing experience—war. It's not just what happens in battle or when someone's specifically in the uniform, and it's not necessarily linear because emotions aren't, and, frankly, because those of us who aren't in the armed forces don't necessarily pay much attention once the warriors come home. We shouldn't have to see the flashpoints of those experiences to at least try to understand the people as human beings who shouldn't be forgotten or dismissed. Also because Mark himself doesn't remember and that's a reality that sometimes happens, too. People don't always have the details, but they have to deal with the fallout regardless.

Do you want to talk about the VA? I'd love to hear you talk about the VA.

I just struck on this idea, after seeing reports on VA hospitals and being aware of the issues surrounding the government's responsibility for returned veterans, that if in the future we created androids to fight in our wars—what would happen to them after? I didn't want to make the government the Big Bad necessarily—even if they might struggle with how to deal with their decisions and are in some way always catching up to the fallout. I wanted to think that the government would at least *try* to help their wounded

warriors—whether human or android. And if they acknowledge that the androids have emotional capacity and can therefore experience trauma, then there would have to be a program to address that. We spend a lot of time and care (though maybe not enough) for the welfare of homeless animals. So why not also for the welfare of the soldiers we created ourselves and put into the worst situations to fight our battles? And, obviously, I was conscious that there is something applicable in that narrative to how we are currently treating—or not treating—our returned veterans. Both as an institution like the government and as civilian citizens.

What does it mean to you, to be a part of POC destroying our way through science fiction? Are there corners of SF that you think may need particular attention as we wreak our destruction?

I love these magazine issues. It's an opportunity to read (and offer) different perspectives, and as a writer, that's at the heart of it for me. I write to explore different perspectives. It's a human endeavor to me and a personal responsibility to myself. I push my own boundaries, ideally, for greater understanding, too. It's not just about offering a greater understanding to a reader; we are none of us infallible to having our own preconceptions and assumptions. "Destroying" allows for some breakage of pigeonholes and prejudices, and in that sense, every corner of every genre can do with some destruction and rebirth. Otherwise we're left with stagnancy or, even worse, regression. I think because my "milieu" in most of my work has dealt with war and its effects—and war is one thing that's sadly consistent in all of human history, spanning continents and cultures—that continuing to challenge the conventions of that genre is important.

What's next for you? What can readers look forward to from you in the future?

I'm currently writing a couple more short stories for anthologies, working on a new novel which I don't want to talk about in detail yet, and there will be more coming out from the Warchild series in one way or another. I'm pretty stoked about all of it!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Nicasio Andres Reed is a queer Filipino-American writer and a member of the Queer Asian SF/F/H Illuminati. They write fiction, comics, and poetry, and their work has been represented in *Beyond: A Queer Sci-Fi Comics Anthology, Strange Horizons, Lightspeed's* Queers Destroy Science Fiction!, *Liminality* and more. Their next short story is upcoming in *Shimmer.* You can find them on Twitter @NicasioSilang, probably tweeting about *Dragon Age* again.

Author Spotlight: Lisa Allen-Agostini

Tyhitia Green

You delved into science fiction with your novel, *The Chalice Project,* but what inspired you to pen the dystopic tale, "Depot 256," about the downtrodden residents of Nuevo Morvant?

I have always been a reader of SF, though *The Chalice Project* was my first major speculative fiction project. Since then, I've written a few shorts in the genre and I really enjoy it. Nuevo Morvant is a take on the area where I grew up: Morvant. It's a great place to live, in many ways, but it is also a hotbed of gun violence linked to drugs. It's on a hill, though; and if you think about global warming predictions, it could be one of the areas in Trinidad that won't go underwater when sea levels rise in the near future. In reality, some areas of Trinidad are already desperately poor and disadvantaged: Water supply is iffy, at best, the recession has food prices going up astronomically, and the drug and gun "authorities" in each district have a great deal of power over residents' day-to-day lives. There are a lot of families affected by gun violence in communities like these. It's not quite as bad as in the garrison communities in Jamaica, but it's getting there, I think. Is Nuevo Morvant a real place in Trinidad right now? No. But is it an extrapolation of the current trajectory? Maybe.

I don't want to reveal too much about your story, but the young narrator was abandoned, yet she still managed to survive. Reading the story of her lonely life was heart-wrenching. Was it difficult to write about how she and her friend obtained food and credits?

This story emerged like Venus, fully grown, from the waters of my subconscious. I literally sat down and wrote the first line and it went on from there with its own momentum. Afterwards I went back and added more Spanglish and gave more thought to the rhythm of the protagonist's language, but the story itself is just how it came to me. Sadly, there are children who live much like this in the real world: orphaned and making do however they can on their own.

You've written in several genres. You're a freelance journalist, a poet, you were an actor in the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, and you've even written plays. What piqued your interest in writing science fiction?

Fantasy and science fiction are among my favourite genres, along with crime fiction,

literary fiction, and popular romance. I think it's natural for a writer to write what she reads.

As a woman of color, and in regard to writing speculative fiction, how do you seek to add diversity to these types of works?

I don't know that I have consciously thought, "I want to bring diversity to speculative fiction." But in everything I write I try to represent my own experience and the world around me. Of my two other published short speculative fiction pieces, one is literally set in J'Ouvert, a part of Trinidad Carnival ("A Fine Specimen," short fiction, published in *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond,* edited by Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall, 2013), and the other is about a Trinidad folklore character called the La Diabless—except this one is modern day, and goes to clubs and lives in the city ("Coming of Age," short fiction, published in *Unconventional Fantasy: A Celebration of Forty Years of the World Fantasy Convention; Vol I,* 2014).

I read that you were hard at work on three manuscripts. When can readers look forward to one, or all three of these stories?

Send me a publisher and you can have 'em next week! Seriously, though, I recently completed a literary fiction manuscript that's looking for a publisher, and I have a young adult manuscript that I'd also like to get into the hands of a publisher. Right now I'm doing a Master's, and my thesis is actually a novel as well—in the genre of Caribbean popular romance. (I am a hardcore generalist.) I enjoyed writing "Depot 256" and I do want to write some more stories about that world, so who knows? Maybe that will be next—if I get a publisher.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Tyhitia Green is an author who pens horror, fantasy, and science fiction. She dabbles in other genres as well, whenever the mood strikes her. Her work has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue* and on Black Girl Nerds.com. She is hard at work on revising the first novel in her dark urban fantasy series. She is also working on several short stories. You can find her on her blog (obfuscationofreality.blogspot.com) or at Goodreads (bit.ly/1T8lfaW).

Author Spotlight: Nick T. Chan

Tyhitia Green

In your story, "Salto Mortal," you probed the depths of many injustices, but I wanted to focus on the domestic abuse aspect. Was this subject matter personal to you? How much research did you have to conduct into this horrific subject?

Domestic violence isn't directly personal to me. However, I've had a couple of acquaintances subjected to it. In both cases, part of what was horrifying for me was that I had no idea what was happening until well after they'd left the relationship and essentially fled for their lives.

Because of that, I've done a great deal of thinking about how abusers often subjugate and attempt to erase their partners' self-identity so that their actions appear to be part of the natural order of things. This can obviously be widened into a broader metaphor about cultural subjugation and erasure.

This story actually originated from two separate collaborations with the talented writers Tina Gower and Amanda Forrest.

Amanda originally wanted to co-write a story about the relationship between Mexico and the US, but the complexity of the issues rapidly became too large for anything short of a novel.

At roughly the same time as Amanda and I were attempting to write that story, I was also writing a fantasy story about an abusive relationship, trying to process my own thoughts about what I'd seen. During writing that story, I consulted with Tina. Tina's a psychologist who has treated the victims of domestic violence. She's also an award-winning writer, so she gave me incredibly valuable insight into the variety and complexity of relationship dynamics between abuser and abused.

The book *Emotional Assault: Recognising the Abusive Partner's Bag of Tricks* by Lisa Kroulik was also helpful in gaining some insight into the psychology of a typical abuser.

These two trunked stories became the backbone of "Salto Mortal."

My main source of information on lucha libre was Heather Levi's book *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations, and Mexican National Identity.* I also received the gracious assistance of the artist Maricela Ugarte Peña in regards to Mexican culture and language.

You've written several short stories and have even been nominated for various awards. Will you continue to only write short stories, or will you venture into novel writing as well? Or do you already have a novel in the works?

I mostly write short stories because I'm too disorganized to write novels. As you might be able to guess from my process of trunking two stories to eventually write "Salto Mortal," I'm not the most organized and efficient of writers.

Having said that, I do love short stories. Breaking into the US market with short stories is tremendously difficult. Practically, it would probably be wiser to start on novels. I've been doing a bit of research and reading. I'm currently obsessed with Cold War-era spy novels, so you might soon see a speculative fiction version of *The Spy Who Came In From The Cold.* Or, more realistically, you'll probably see a novel with the most tangential of associations with the classic spy novels.

As a person of color and a writer, what would you like to see more of as far as diversity in speculative fiction?

Obviously, I'd like a diverse list of voices taking speculative fiction in all kinds of directions. Any community needs the constant influx of new ideas and new perspectives in order to remain vital and healthy. Although there's chaos and displacement involved with new voices, a mature community is enriched by them.

Personally, I'd like to see writers from cultures I don't know very well. From an Australian perspective, indigenous writers are underrepresented in speculative fiction. I know I haven't read enough non-Western speculative fiction (outside of some Japanese science fiction). There's a whole world of speculative fiction out there and it's very easy to be ignorant of it unless major publishers and magazines, like *Lightspeed,* are proactive in reflecting it to the masses.

I always like seeing things from truly different perspectives and different lives, but I'd also like to see more subtle twists on some of our more popular tropes. I like my challenges, but I'd also like to see my comfort food slightly changed. What does the Zimbabwian *Harry Potter* look like? The Chinese *Star Wars?* There should be more people of colour everywhere in the publishing industry, from writers through to corporate owners.

I'd also like to see more work tackling the complexities of grappling with POC identity. For me, part of this story is about grappling with identity questions like "How Chinese am I?" In a world of increasing immigration and intermarriage, I think these kind of stories are important in ensuring that cultures enrich each other.

I'm sure you're hard at work on other projects. When will your next work of fiction be available?

That's in the hands of the editors and my own capricious writing process. Hopefully soon. I'll definitely have a story coming out in an anthology called *Starlight and Second*

(ed. by Dustin Adams) at some stage this year.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Tyhitia Green is an author who pens horror, fantasy, and science fiction. She dabbles in other genres as well, whenever the mood strikes her. Her work has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue* and on BlackGirlNerds.com. She is hard at work on revising the first novel in her dark urban fantasy series. She is also working on several short stories. You can find her on her blog (obfuscationofreality.blogspot.com) or at Goodreads (bit.ly/1T8lfaW).

Author Spotlight: Brian K. Hudson

Pablo Miguel Alberto Vazquez

The Cherokee Nation is rich in history, struggle, culture, and mythology. Is there anything in particular from Cherokee history/culture that inspired you to write this fascinating story?

Certainly the oral tradition of the spider bringing the first fire to us was working in the back of my mind somewhere when I first started to conceptualize the story. In the story, I describe simply a spider, rather than a water spider, which is how the story is traditionally told. This deviation isn't unrealistic if we consider that many Cherokee stories have a multiplicity of versions, different versions told by certain families. But the similar word for the nonhuman animal in that tradition and the term *spider*—as in, a program used to scour the web—definitely started me thinking about the possibility of Cherokee cyberpunk. I spent several years as a programmer coding in many languages, including Linux scripting, so I drew on my programming experience, specifically from the late '90s, to depict the digital details of the story. But beyond personal experience and my own fascination with computers is the fact that we as Cherokees have always been early adopters of technology. The first telephone west of the Mississippi was owned by a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (CNO). You can see this dedication to technology as a means for language preservation in the Language Technology Department of the CNO. I'm inspired by the work of that team, particularly the work of Roy Boney and Joe Erb, two Cherokee artists who, among others, worked with Google, Apple, Microsoft, and other tech companies to get Cherokee integrated into those systems. They are doing such amazing work in that department, not only with language integration and devices, but also with creating video games in Cherokee for the immersion schools. In addition to traditional stories and current technology being used for language revitalization, several novels that I would categorize as Cherokee cyberpunk—specifically the work of Blake Hausman and Daniel H. Wilson—were influential in the early stages of writing "Digital Medicine."

What challenges have you encountered in writing speculative fiction involving First Peoples and their struggles?

My protagonist is a young woman who is an upperclassman in high school in the year 1999. I graduated from Sequoyah High School in Claremore, Oklahoma, in 1996. So writing from the perspective of a young Cherokee adult in the late '90s wasn't much of a struggle beyond remembering the new and shiny emerging internet. What I struggled with most was attempting to write in the voice of a young *woman*. I re-watched a few episodes

from that year of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Not "Pangs," mind you, in which Buffy fights some aggrieved Indian spirit, but rather earlier episodes of that season. This reminded me of the slang we used at the time. I consulted one of my female Cherokee colleagues and sent drafts to the women on the Cherokee-enrolled side of my family. I'm still not sure I got Spider's voice right. My hope is that the voice is believable enough to interest young Cherokee women (and men) in our language and the uses of technology for preserving it. If it reaches a Cherokee reader and she relates to Spider in some way, I'll be happy.

I've known many POC fans who have steered away from public writing for fear that no one cares about their stories. What advice would you give aspiring POC writers in this regard and did you have to overcome this mental hurdle yourself?

There are themes that tend to get more popular attention when it comes to representation of Native people in stories, such as addiction, unspoiled nature, and being saved by white dudes. I understand there is potential to subvert the problematic trope of the alcoholic Indian who lives in a pristine forest and who needs to be saved by white people. But I'm not really interested in writing about those things. I'm a technophile who grew up in the tiny town of Bushyhead in the middle of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. William Sanders, the first Cherokee SF writer to my knowledge, has spoken about how hard it was to get his SF novel *The Ballad of Billy Badass* published because his Indian protagonist wasn't what most editors were looking for. Thankfully, there are more and more venues opening up for writers of color who write speculative fiction. Although there has been a growing awareness of the need for diversity in traditional publishing, there needs to be more recognition of the multiplicity of forms that diversity can take. I would advise POC writers to read as much of the amazing work that they can get their hands on by people of color who have been writing speculative fiction for quite some time now. And also to connect with other writers of color through organizations such as the Carl Brandon Society who do great work in fostering new talent and promoting speculative fiction by writers of color.

Do you have anything coming out soon of interest to our readers that we should be looking for?

I have a short story called "Land Run on Sooner City" about a group of Indigenous nomads, set in a dystopian version of the University of Oklahoma in Norman. It should be out this year in a collection published by Theytus Books titled *mitewacimowina: Indigenous Science Fiction & Speculative Storytelling*. I'm also co-editing with Grace Dillon a collection of critical essays on the genre of Indigenous SF. It's such an honor to get to work with Dillon. Her anthology *Walking the Clouds* made me aware of the genre

of Indigenous futurism. My essay is tentatively titled “If Sequoyah Was a Cyberpunk” and traces a Cherokee genealogy for the tribally-specific cyberpunk subgenre to which I see “Digital Medicine” contributing.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Pablo Miguel Alberto Vazquez considers himself many things, including performer, poet, wild fanboy, sometimes scholar/always student, agitator, bard-magus, and whatever else he comes up with. A true lover of Freedom and Passion, he champions love and unity, liberty and danger, creativity and aesthetics. He’s a cinephile, DC Comics enthusiast, voracious reader, and avid gamer (tabletop/video). Born alongside the Panama Canal, he strangely does not like extreme heat and views his perfect weather to be something akin to Fimbulwinter, but he definitely is a child of the Caribbean, with all of its mystic glory, tropical paradises and delicious culinary trappings. Pablo spends his time traversing various underground and subcultural communities, ranging from magical lodges and mystic circles, unsanctioned parties and kink events to Underground Rap and radical bookstores to, of course, Science Fiction and Fantasy fandom. He also prefers Social Justice Wizard, thank you very much.

Author Spotlight: Sofia Samatar

Isabel Yap

Several of the protagonists in your stories are children or youths (Sahra in this story, Tisha in "How to Get Back from the Forest," the narrator in "Selkie Stories Are For Losers"). Do you approach writing younger protagonists differently from writing adult protagonists? What do you enjoy about writing younger characters?

I love writing young characters. I love their freshness. There's something about writing in a young voice that returns you to childhood. Childhood is a wellspring for a lot of writers, I think, a place of intense feelings and clarity of vision. And of course those are also the reasons we need art—to experience powerful emotions and to see things in a new way. A kid's perspective is great for that. When you write a young voice, you remember how it was to be utterly, stupidly passionate about things, and to perceive the injustices we often learn to close our eyes to later. Kids are not fooled when we try to cover up inequality. They will divide a cookie precisely in half. They're the most conscientious people in the world that way.

This story is written as a series of messages to Fox. I love the way you used the word "tag" for it—it put me in mind of kids saying "tag, you're it!"—and also linking someone in Facebook posts. How did you decide to use that format for this story?

It did come from internet language, from the idea of tagging people on social media! I just extended that concept into a system of communication.

When Mom talks, it feels like her past is the present we're living in—"In those days, they could seize you for anything." The alarming picture she paints feels very current with our reality as readers. What was the initial idea for the story and its setting?

This story started with a prompt, which is unusual for me. Neil Gaiman asked a bunch of writers to come and read original stories at an offsite event at last year's TED conference in Vancouver. The prompt was, "Write a story about the world you would like to live in fifteen or twenty years from now." So the project was new to me in every way—writing to a prompt, writing a utopia, writing a story that wasn't depressing! In this story, although I write in Sahra's voice, I am actually Mom as much as Sahra, because Mom has experienced the world I know. So yes, what she remembers is our current reality, a world that hasn't yet embraced the three key elements of my utopia: the

disintegration of borders, the opening of the prisons, and the abandonment of the automobile.

I admire how well you captured the immigration narrative, and the differing perspectives a child and a parent might have about it. I felt Sahra's helplessness, but I also sympathized with Mom when she said, "You don't know how lucky you are." There's also a point when Sahra says: *Belonging. It hurts.* Were you aware of this theme while starting the story, or did it grow out of the writing?

The theme grew out of the writing, which is what always happens with my work. I'll have a hint or two when I start, a setting, a situation, but until I write the story I never know what it's really about.

The image of a red thread has connotations in certain cultures. In Chinese and Japanese mythology it symbolizes a link between destined lovers; in Greek myth it's what Theseus used to escape the Minotaur's labyrinth. Did you have either of these in mind while writing this story?

Alas, no. All I can say is thank you, Isabel, that's awesome! Of course, it's always possible, even likely, that I absorbed these associations without knowing it. That happens to artists all the time. We don't know what we've experienced or heard of, we can't remember it all. We can only sense a tiny part of the huge network of images passing through us at every moment.

Do you have any advice for writers of color, especially those who would like to write speculative short fiction?

The thing you're afraid of, the thing you want to hide, the thing mainstream markets can't understand, the thing that won't sell: that is your best thing, and it will make you a writer.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Isabel Yap writes fiction and poetry, works in the tech industry, and drinks tea. Born and raised in Manila, she has also lived in California, Tokyo (for ninety-six days!), and London. In 2013, she attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has been published by *Book Smugglers Publishing, Uncanny Magazine, Tor.com, Shimmer, Interfictions,* and *Nightmare.* You can find her on her website (isalikeswords.wordpress.com) or on Twitter at @visyap.

Author Spotlight: Terence Taylor

Tara Sim

In "Wilson's Singularity," we get a glimpse of a future world that asks the question: Would it be better to be ruled by something inhuman if it cured the world's problems, or to live in an imperfect world and keep our humanity? Where did you get the inspiration to write this story about a failed utopia?

A combination of things—partly the insanity of the 2016 election campaigns and the disparate visions of America presented, none of which seem to address the real problems, except possibly Bernie Sanders, and even he has blinders on. The other was a conversation with a friend who despaired of us getting through the next decade under any of the candidates who said the American people don't deserve democracy, that what we need is a benign dictatorship that takes good care of us.

That started me thinking about how well that would really work, and what if it wasn't a human but a well-intentioned AI that took over, a dispassionate but caring force for good that still pissed off people? Could we ever be happy with a utopian society if we weren't the architects, and would everyone ever be happy with it, whatever form it took? How could that happen in the first place and why—and then I was off and running . . .

Wilson represents an older world where there was more freedom of choice and more violence as a consequence. Jim represents a newer world where freedom of choice is taken away, yet violence is nonexistent. Can you go into how you reflected this in their personalities and their relationship?

The first draft had almost no details about their relationship and less about Jim . . . It was too much about the machine and how it took over and on reflection needed to be more about Wilson, to see all that through him. The rewrite explored everything much more deeply, and Jim's backstory and the reasons for their relationship grew clearer as well.

The difference in their ages was always there, but it took on greater significance as Jim's part in the story grew from someone using Wilson's relationship to Unity as an excuse to leave him in the first draft, to a deeper problem with the status quo of their new world order. Fleshing them out moved the story away from the AI, which grew less prominent because the story was really about "us," not it.

The distinction you make between them evolved as the core difference in their worldviews, shaped by how they grew up. I see generational differences around me in how the same situations or facts are viewed and that seemed the best way to express the central conflict of the story—as it was reflected in their relationship. That sounds obvious

now, but getting there was about seeing the trees instead of the forest. To me, growing up in our violent world like Wilson, living in a new world where all are provided for equally, with no wars, no killing, no discrimination, seems almost ideal, even under a machine's control.

But any Heaven will always be someone else's Hell, and that became Jim's background. It's not that he wants the violence, but he didn't know it, so he misses the freedom to choose in the abstract. The idea that his attraction to Wilson's fame and the attendant advantages would outweigh his upbringing was interesting to me, and I've seen enough examples of that. It also laid the groundwork for his departure and return.

What was more interesting to me was the idea that he was Wilson's Jiminy Cricket—that Jim could be with Wilson and stay true to his feelings. Expressing them gave Wilson a way to justify what he'd done to the world by countering Jim's objections—but also in delivering his husband's complaints to Unity to assuage any residual guilt. It's a balance in their relationship that goes askew once Jim meets "the opposition" and is re-indoctrinated into his parents' beliefs—the story became about that change coming to a head.

There's quite a moving scene where Wilson reflects upon his first conversations with Unity, and how their bond developed over discussions of violence surrounding race in America. How do you feel like the current threats of today's world—police brutality, ISIS, etc.—relate to our current state of technology? Do you think this makes us more connected or drawn apart?

I think it makes us both. We communicate almost continuously in smaller and smaller bursts, email chains, Facebook, texting, Twitter—a trend ultimately expressed in Instagram, where we reduce what we have to say to a single image. The adage that a picture tells a thousand words has become literally literal in that and emoticons.

Because of that constant interchange, I know more about what's going on with more of my friends who live over a greater distance than ever before. But I see them less than ever. When the tech wasn't there, we called or made more time to get together to satisfy the same level of intimacy. So my generation spends more time talking to more people, but in rooms alone, seeing less of them in person. That's probably different for the current generation that uses social media more to link up in Meetups, or Tinder, etc.

That generational difference is essential, because for mine social media is a way to stay informed, for those younger it's more a call to action—this is how Twitter overthrew Egypt, and how it's changing world politics.

When it began, the Internet allowed us to congregate with like minds from the highest to lowest level. Now social media on phones and tablets lets people unite and organize in a way never before possible, with unprecedented portability in real time. We can use that to our advantage to reduce police brutality with live police officer cameras that send

video directly to headquarters in real time to avoid tampering. But the technology also allows coordinated terrorism, like the bombings we saw in Belgium, and undoubtedly others.

What's scared me most was a news story about young people in America in touch with ISIS recruiters by social media offering to fly over there to fight the good fight and being told no—stay home—you can do us more good as a resident sleeper agent. And we're seeing it, people who've been here all their lives, completely off the radar, now ready to —well, do whatever. It's as radical a change in warfare as eighteenth-century American rebels using guerilla warfare to pick off regimented British troops from hiding. We're moving into new methods of conflict we've never had before.

I'm still more scared of homegrown white separatists than I am of Muslim extremists, because they've historically killed more Americans. A hacker recently sent racist recruitment flyers out of unsecured printers on college campuses across the country. What keeps them from hijacking drone bombers and sending them into black neighborhoods?

All that worries me more than a computer willing to feed and shelter everyone taking over the world, or even the Illuminati. I tell conspiracy theorists that I only wish there was an intelligent plan to turn us into one world. That seems preferable to the chaotic fight for dominance we have now, as the last vestiges of the conservative old order rages globally against the dying of their light as the majority of us grow past them. Surprise, yes, ultimately I am an optimist. We are meant to be better than this; we just have a lot of growing up to do, as long as we can survive long enough to do it.

What are some of your favorite AIs in science fiction?

It's funny, there were artificial intelligences long before we called them that, usually housed in robot bodies. Those were my first. The Robot in *Lost in Space* was a friend I wish I had growing up. HAL 9000 may have been a killer, but it was well-meaning, just poorly programmed, so it was really a victim of its maker's flaws, as are we all. Humanity is evidence that whatever higher power there is likes to experiment and that not all its creations are perfect. Speaking of godlike, Frankenstein's monster, as played by Karloff . . . His broken brain was taken from a jar, but his mind was his own, an artificially bred intelligence. And Data. Who doesn't love Data?

Are you currently working on something new, or do you have any upcoming projects we should keep an eye out for?

Oh yes, the curse and blessing of being wildly ADHD, I'm always busy . . . I have a regular review column in *Fantastic Stories of the Imagination,* "READ ME!," and will be working my way through reviews of a three-foot-tall stack of books I've been

promising to read for two years now. What better way to do it than by setting a bi-monthly deadline? That's great fun to write and hopefully to read.

I'm editing a documentary film called *Invisible Universe* directed by M. Asli Dukan, as long as we keep funds coming in, so if you want to see it, go to the site and pitch in! She's been shooting interviews and events for eight years, documenting the leading lights in the history of black speculative fiction. Seeing her footage of the amazing Octavia Butler and my dear departed friend Leslie Banks has been part of the pleasure of helping Asli realize her vision, as well as enjoying her many conversations with living legends like Sam Delany and pretty much everyone else you'd want to sit and chat with in genre fiction, along with academic experts, artists . . . it's historic.

And last, but far from least, an email query from my first novel's agent has inspired me to face my fears and stop delaying the conclusion of my Vampire Testaments trilogy. The Vampire Testaments page on Facebook will track my progress. I face the challenge with pure terror—I have a whole new world to build, set twenty years in New York's future, but have already made major breakthroughs. Until that's done at the end of the year, I'm happy to say that people can still read me here and in the *What the #@&% Is That?* anthology, edited by John Joseph Adams and Douglas Cohen!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Tara Sim is the author of *Timekeeper* (Sky Pony Press, Nov. 1, 2016) and can typically be found wandering the wilds of the Bay Area, California. When she's not chasing cats or lurking in bookstores, she writes books about magic, clocks, and explosives. Half-Indian and full geek, she eats too many samosas and awkwardly dances to Bhangra music. Follow her on Twitter at @EachStarAWorld, or check out her website at tarasim.com.

Author Spotlight: Steven Barnes

Arley Sorg

There are a lot of different elements and concepts at play in this story. One key concept is the notion of attraction and, to a degree, sexuality, as not only fluid but malleable and even manipulable. In the piece, ad people are enlisted to deliberately impact sexual attraction, with eventually grave and global consequences. How much of this do you see at play in our culture and history, and what have the consequences of these manipulations been?

Look at Michael Jackson, and if I were to propose that his intent was to become transracial, it would fit everything we can observe: straight hair, thinned nose, whitened skin, white children, white wife. I cannot read his mind, but it seems to me that this is the sickness of being human and trying desperately to fit in with a dominant culture. Protective coloration. After WWII, Japanese women were pumping up their chests and Chinese men had plastic surgery on their eyes. Sexuality is a powerful expression of cultural acceptance, so it really pops out there. The consequences can be a profound self-loathing, and preference for the dominator's appearance over your own.

There's something really grounding and immersive about the initial interactions between the protagonist and Rhonda. That moment became so real for me, I was sucked into the story. What are the techniques you employ to bring the reader into your world(s) and keep them there?

Creating details about the world that resonate with the reader's experience. If it is hugely alien, then you have to ground it in empathizeable human emotions. Sex, power, love, and communication are basic to all human cultures, so if you touch on those things, bingo. Only survival itself is more primary.

I loved the line, "She was a long drink of coffee." It's a deceptively elegant way to describe a character: The line is both familiar and new, quick but not heavy-handed or clumsy. It also cues the reader, to a degree, to physicality and culture, placing both characters in context. Do you feel like writing non-white characters raises specific challenges, and how do you deal with those challenges?

Well, most of my career I've written for a majority white audience, and in that case the assumption is of whiteness, and you have to step outside of that stream to establish anything different. If I'm writing for non-white audiences, there will be different

challenges of course, but it's a joy to have to rise to that challenge.

To me, there are so many clever social comments in the story. I really loved this line: "And the obvious insulting implication was that I'd been chosen for this assignment because I'd made Nigerians attractive to Chinese, and apparently that was now seen as more miraculous than turning vampires into vegans. Oh, my." I found a lot of fairly painful truths laced throughout the narrative, despite the somewhat tongue-in-cheek voice. Do you write stories hoping that the reader will walk away with an idea or a message, and if so, what is the primary message you'd like to convey with this one?

The original story notion is some twenty years old, but I wasn't writing short pieces then. I think that the theme of an ad man who accidentally ends the world was a reaction to black people being encouraged to straighten their hair and lighten their skin . . . and encouragements for black women to find white men sexually appealing while simultaneously erecting barriers between black men and white women. That's a very old game between males, and there are some nasty side effects. If there is a message, it probably has to do with remembering that the basic aspects of sexual attraction exist to further the species. The fact that we are re-negotiating that now that we've reached max population density (and I'm glad we are!) doesn't mean we should ignore those basic wirings. On the other hand, maybe the "message" is that we are more malleable than we think, and our basic drives can be manipulated by clever people who do not have positive intentions.

I really enjoyed the story. I found it entertaining and thought-provoking; I related in interesting ways, not to mention it was spiked with fascinating ironies. What are you working on now that we can look forward to?

Thank you. I was happy to find a home for it. I have a novel called *Twelve Days,* the sequel to my book *The Kundalini Equation,* coming out from Tor late this year. I'm looking forward to it!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Arley Sorg grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado. He studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and usually writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he is an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine.* He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

Author Spotlight: Dayo Ntwari

Cassandra Khaw

Most obvious question first: Where did this story come from? There's a visceral solidity to the setting and the events that makes me feel like it was a re-visioning of something that had really happened. What inspired it?

I actually dreamt the opening scene of this story. It was so vivid (and kind of scary) that it woke me right up, and I quickly reached for my notebook to scribble it down. While I was taking down the village scene, more and more of the story began to reveal itself to me. The more I wrote down, the more I fell in love with the story. I'm in a place with my writing where I like to take the fantastical and lob it at the mundane to see what happens. Will it be caught? Will it be dodged? Will it be frantically evaded or violently persecuted? These scenarios intrigue me.

Coming from a multicultural background, I'm generally fascinated with how linguistics function in different countries. Can you tell me about the patois used in the story?

It was fun playing with that, and I tried not to go overboard with it. I wanted even non-Pidgin English-speakers to at least have a general sense of what the pidgin conversations are about. To achieve that, I always had my girlfriend (who doesn't speak Pidgin) read it, and then tell me whether or not she got the gist of what was being talked about. That way I got to tweak the conversation until it became clearer.

I love using Pidgin in my writing. I think in a story that takes place in Anglophone West Africa, including Pidgin in the dialogue can give it all a more grounded feel. It shows the reader how people in the region often talk with one another. In my opinion, that adds to the immersion, and makes it that much more vivid.

In the story, Pidgin is only used during online chats. Usually, in Nigeria, Pidgin is spoken between friends who are not self-conscious about speaking "broken English." I say self-conscious, because for some people there can be a certain vibe of the unsophisticated that comes with speaking Pidgin, and not everyone might be comfortable being viewed that way. There are assumptions that might be made regarding one's social status or level of education, for example. On the other hand, speaking Pidgin could also just imply a certain closeness in the relationship between the speakers. It depends on the context, and there is little of that with Kehinde and Gorimapa. In the online chat, when she contacts Gorimapa, we quickly learn he is some kind of smuggler for hire. The fact that he is communicated with in Pidgin puts him in a certain contrast to Kehinde and her team, one of whom is a professor. My hope is that the response readers have to the character of

Gorimapa will be in part determined by the reader's attitude towards using, or hearing or reading, Pidgin English.

Black wings, white wings, sacrifice and love, social media furor. I've asked you about whether the story was inspired by real events, but now I really need to know: How did the seed come about and how did this story go from a figment of inspiration to what it is today?

As the story kept growing, I kept asking, how would this play out, if it actually happened in Nigeria? How would people respond? When we think of winged people, we tend to associate them with angelic beings. Generally, most people in the world, regardless of their religion, imagine angels as white or light-skinned beings, dressed in white, with white wings. And the universal image of Jesus is basically, a handsome, blue-eyed white guy with long flowing hair. I have sometimes asked friends if they would accept an image of Jesus as a Sub-Saharan black guy, or a Middle Eastern guy. Every single time the answer has been "No, Jesus was white."

I see this as the effect of our colonial past, which is perpetuated by the way Africans, and people of colour in general, are conveyed to us by the media: as inherently inferior to white people. In popular media, a being with black wings is usually presented as an antagonistic character, an evil being. I tried to use the scene with the talk-show hosts to briefly show how we have almost unquestioningly absorbed entire world views which are detrimental to our self-esteem, to our progress as different peoples, whether we're conscious of this or not.

The appearance of the omoshango would not evoke an "It's a bird! It's a plane!" type of response in this setting, I think. It would start with curiosity. Then once the authenticity of these beings has been established, there would be panic and hostility. I tried to use that as the framework under which Kehinde's team operated. They had to be as secretive as they could, because their lives were in danger from the very people they were working so hard to liberate. Choosing that life automatically becomes a continual sacrifice. And it may eventually lead to self-doubt. It may lead to frustration, and you ask yourself whether it's even worth it. Putting it all on the line for people who, out of a fear borne of a twisted worldview, would destroy you just for the sake of restoring "the natural order."

Eventually, I realized this was going to be far too much for a short story, but I was really excited about trying to get this into POC Destroy SF! So I decided to trim the story down as much as I could, and then later write the full story in novel form.

What kind of writer *are* you? And by this, I don't mean your literary Zodiac sign. Are you the sort to sit for hours to envision your world? Do you write in bursts? Do you outline obsessively? What's your process, man?

How it usually starts is I either have some interesting dream, or I get inspiration from something I read or watched or talked about. Rarely do I sit down and try to think something up from scratch. That doesn't really work for me, because I just end up going in circles. It's mostly random inspiration. Fortunately, having always been an introverted daydreamer, I never really have to wait too long until something hits me.

If I like the idea, I start by looking for music that I feel works best with the story's imagery and mood. Sometimes, the soundtrack can be several different tracks for different parts of the story; sometimes it's just one track for the whole story. Whichever it is, I then play the soundtrack on repeat, for hours (or days!), as I go about my day, while turning the scene or story over and over in my mind. I guess that qualifies as obsessive outlining, in a fashion. At the same time, except for the first notes I take, I don't actually sit down to write until the story is almost fully formed in my head. Once I started writing, I put in my earbuds and play the soundtrack throughout. It can be a great way to get sick of a song.

Even when the story is ready to be written, being an IT guy in my day job can make it difficult to find the time and energy to sit down and write it all down. I carry so many stories around in my head, I'm embarrassed that I haven't written more. So, a while ago, I started waking up an hour or two earlier, to make more time for my writing.

Last but not least, can you tell us about the projects you've got coming next?

I want to write the full Omoshango story. This is the first story I have ever sold. It's also the first time I even tried selling a story. To be honest, I'm still in shock. There is so much more to tell about Omoshango, and this is just the beginning. Kehinde is one of my favourite characters I've ever written, and I have barely touched the surface of what this character is about, what her life looks like, her journey, her development. This doesn't seem to be a story that is content with living just in my head.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Cassandra Khaw (cassandrakhaw.com) is the business developer for Ysbryd Games, and also an occasional contributor for Ars Technica UK and Eurogamer. When not otherwise working, she's either punching things or writing fiction. Her work can be found or is forthcoming at *Clarkesworld* and *Daily Science Fiction*.

Author Spotlight: Isha Karki

Nicasio Andres Reed

Nerd that I am, I can't read "Firebird" without drawing comparisons to comic book super-soldier stories and characters such as Captain America and The Hulk, and eventually also to *The Island of Doctor Moreau.* Are those canons or tropes that you intentionally drew on and subverted? What was the spark of inspiration for this story?

We're always inspired and influenced by the things we read, watch and consume; for example, recently I was obsessed with Marvel's *Jessica Jones* and I'm reading *Lilith's Brood.* In that vein, yes, these well-known tropes certainly fed into "Firebird." I wanted to explore the story of the sacrificed soldiers, but from the sidelines, from Percy's eyes; how would someone react to witnessing such experiments, would their response be different based on race and position in society? I think many real life soldiers would sign up to be turned "super"—but what if the experiments went to shit (like Project Oly), who would then be *made* to volunteer? "Firebird" is not interested in the super-soldier turns superhero/saviour complex so much as it is in the story of that exploitation, the story of the marginalised.

The actual spark for the story was a prompt my sister gave me: A boy who can fly suddenly discovers he can't anymore. I wrote "Firebird" for my sister, imagining a world in which a boy would be able to fly. Interestingly, the first image I got in my head was a girl in a cockpit. Honestly, I *hate* it when writers say this, but this was the first story where the world just whizzed into my mind—I had a lot of fun connecting the dots.

What did you struggle with while writing this story?

The silly answer: the science! There was originally a scene where Percy eats exactly six POMs as they enter the radiation zone of Hades (a not so subtle nod to the Persephone myth) and has to barf them out because they've "turned" poisonous. However I looked at it, however I researched radioactive metals, there was no way that scene could stay and still scientifically make sense.

Percy's memory of childhood complicity in the racist bullying of another student, and the way she connects that to her academic success, really struck me as a reader. What led you to include this incident?

I wanted to explore two things: the experience of being othered and the fact that "good

people" are flawed. We see Percy as a complicit child and an ambitious student. At the first stage, she sides with the majority though she *knows* it's wrong; that child-Percy thinks it's necessary to do so is both tragic and very much a reality. Her actions haunt her. As an Academy student, she is concerned with correcting a wrong: she wants to prove that women can do as well as men, that someone who looks like her is worthy. A lot of us are caught up in this fight. But in some ways, her vision is myopic, much in the way we operate on a daily basis. She only sees the reality of the Slummies when she is thrust into it. She wouldn't be wrong in fighting the "smaller" fight—not at all. But that childhood memory is partly there to up the emotional stakes, to show us how in the end, Percy chooses to fight for someone else, against an injustice that is bigger than her own life.

The complicity and her shame are also a reminder that she is a person—Percy may end up being brave, but bravery lies in the decisions we make, after the experiences we've had. We have all done things we're not proud of. We carry our actions with us, even if we come to terms with them, they shape who we are; I wanted to show that Percy's choices are a result of all her lived experience.

What are the particular ways that POC, as opposed to non-POC, can destroy science fiction?

Perspective. One of the most important things a POC writer brings to their stories is a new perspective, a different angle, a different space from which we speak. This is crucial in breathing life to well-worn narratives. As the call for submissions suggested, "POC" is an incredibly broad term, so it's hard to speak in blanket generalisations. But as a first-generation Nepali, I have found myself at the edges of both my native Nepali culture and my adopted British/English one. This point of difference allows me to write from the perspective of characters like Percy who are also caught in these in-between spaces.

I obsess over dystopias, but sometimes I find myself thinking okay, what if this thing happened in a different part of the world? Or okay, shit went down in the world, but how does it affect people beyond this very white community in this very white country? In any speculative situation, there are layers and layers to be mined. That's what POC writers can destroy, that yawning space waiting to be filled.

I very much enjoyed this story, and look forward to whatever's next from you. What can we expect down the line?

A lot more! SFF stories with an angle! I'm currently working on two short stories. Number one—let's call it my eerie feminist dystopian nightmare—explores state control of women's bodies and reproductive rights. Number two is set in a sort of second world fantasy, based on our imperial history, where othered cultures are paraded and exoticised,

and a Trickster, a Pedlar, and a Curiosity cross paths with interesting consequences.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Nicasio Andres Reed is a queer Filipino-American writer and a member of the Queer Asian SF/F/H Illuminati. They write fiction, comics, and poetry, and their work has been represented in *Beyond: A Queer Sci-Fi Comics Anthology, Strange Horizons, Lightspeed's* Queers Destroy Science Fiction!, *Liminality* and more. Their next short story is upcoming in *Shimmer*. You can find them on Twitter @NicasioSilang, probably tweeting about *Dragon Age* again.

Author Spotlight: Gabriela Santiago

Tara Sim

Your story focuses on nature and how The Land influences the farmers and children who live in this new world. Did your family's farm influence "As Long As It Takes to Make the World"? How did this idea come about?

I come from a family of farmers, storytellers, farmers, scientists, and farmers. The Land is my Uncle Henry's farm. I didn't even change the name. I shuffled the geography a bit to make everything fit the way I wanted it to, stuck several extra trailers down on it, and renamed the Upperland and the Bottomland to the Upperfield and the Bottomfield, but it's my uncle's organic vegetable farm.

The setting was also the first character for me. I was exercising when the lines that begin the Summer section popped into my head, and as they went around and around my head they became so present and immediate to me that I had to get off the treadmill and bike home, repeating them the whole time so that I wouldn't forget them until I could type them into my computer.

As I considered the ways I might make this setting/character into a story, I hit upon the idea of writing it as a gift for my grandfather, a farmer and a retired professor of genetics at Illinois State University. I love my grandfather and have always wanted to be able to share something as important to me as my writing with him, but since he doesn't do well with violence in fiction and most of my stories have significant amounts of body horror, that wasn't possible. I resolved to try something different with this story, and the result was a love letter to a childhood spent helping out on my uncle's farm every summer (and then, when my mother also took up farming, helping out on her organic fruit and herb farm year-round), learning to love nature and farming and to respect the land. And it's a love letter to the worlds within worlds that children create, all the hours my sisters and cousins and I spent building forts by stacking tree branches around old twisted oaks, and weaving hammocks out of old twine until we were called back to help with the mesclun, and digging through the old scrap heap to find shards of toy teapots that we would glue back together. And it's a thank you to my whole extended family for impressing upon me a love of the complexity of science, a love of stories and literature, and an understanding of the need for respect for and stewardship of the land we owe our livelihoods, and indeed our lives, to.

The Land, for all its vegetation and similarities to the Earth that came before it, is actually made up of a series of algorithms. Can you talk a little more about this theme of nature vs. science? Do you think this sort of world could be in our future?

Nature and science are not necessarily in conflict. They can work together and serve each other, but there has to be an understanding that humans do not stand above and apart from nature in anything we do.

Farmers are necessarily scientists. Whether or not they have a degree, farmers understand the genetics involved in breeding animals, the balance within their own ecosystem and the way that is detrimentally affected by invasive species and the use of pesticides, the chemistry of how the pH of the soil affects different crops and how to alter it.

So I don't see the theme of the story as nature versus science. I see it as a conflict between demanding and understanding, between the kinds of labor that our society values or doesn't value, "innovators" versus "maintainers." It's a conflict between those who believe that power gives them the right to bend the world into their image of what it should be, and those who put in the hard work of making the world the best version of what it already is. The conflict comes when we posit humans not as part of the ecosystem and/or algorithm, but as somehow standing above it, able to alter only the bits we want altered without affecting anything else. That's when we get birds dying from pesticides, and superweeds resistant to herbicides due to the increased use of herbicide-resistant GMOs. That's when you get a Green Revolution that increases overall food production but results in a loss of biodiversity, that creates monocultures which put us in a precarious position if a pest or blight shows up that they have no resistance to, and that increases class disparities as smaller farmers go into debt trying to keep up.

The farmers and the preservitors both believe that they love The Land and want what's best for it, but what the preservitors want is to make The Land into something it is not—and maybe never was, for all we know of the accuracy of their historical records—while the farmers want to understand The Land and work with it as what it really is. In some sense, the preservitors have already won, because they really have created an artificial world whose programming they have the final say in. But on the other hand, they underestimate the complexity of their own creation. There's a line in the story where I call The Land "a discrete combinatorial system," which is just another way of calling it a language. The preservitors may have an understanding of the rules of the language, but they aren't fluent in it. They don't live it. Try as they might, they cannot completely impose themselves on it, because it doesn't truly belong to them. It's greater and more complex than they give it credit for.

Poetry plays an important role in this story. How much does poetry influence you as a writer? Do you have a favorite poet/poem?

Wendell Berry is my grandfather's favorite poet. When I made the decision to write this story as a gift for him, it was only a few weeks since I had visited him, and he had read us several poems that made a deep impression on him. The last poem in "As Long

As It Takes to Make the World" was one that kept rattling around my brain long after I got home, and so it was a natural choice to bring it and other Wendell Berry poems into the story.

You see a lot of stereotypes about rural characters in the media, and so it was important to me to depict farmers who have a love and a reverence for the written word like my own family has—we attended the local Shakespeare festival every year growing up; my mom stays awake on the drive up to market with chocolate-covered espresso beans and Barbara Kingsolver audiobooks; when you go into one of our houses, the first thing you see is all the books: biographies of Darwin, encyclopedias of herbs, novels by Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez and Louise Erdrich and Roald Dahl. My super-talented cousin Aozora Brockman writes poetry influenced by the meditative work of weeding and harvesting; you can read her prize-winning poem "Twenty-One," which also touches on the themes of the imaginary worlds children create, at bit.ly/1pLwm27.

I'm also influenced by spoken word poets like Lin-Manuel Miranda, and speculative fiction writers with poetic prose like Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury, and China Miéville. And, though I wasn't thinking of this consciously when I wrote the story, in hindsight my use of poetry probably came out of my fandom background as well. There's a genre of fanfiction called songfic where lyrics are interspersed throughout the story as a way of asking readers to reinterpret the characters through the lyrics, and the lyrics through the characters, and that's what I wanted the poetry to do in this story as well.

What do you hope for readers to take away from this story?

I suppose I want them to fall in love with The Land.

I wanted to capture the beauty of Woodford County, Illinois: that understated patchwork green and gold, the rolling hills with winding creeks, the sudden swathes of woods where the trees bend over and shadow the road and you feel like you're driving through a cathedral. The secret nooks and crannies that only children know: the beds of clay along the stream banks, the overturned hollow oak logs with the perfect bumps for footholds, the forgotten rusting bits of machinery covered with poison ivy and stained dark under the mulberry trees. And I wanted, in showing that beauty and making people fall in love with it, for them to hopefully also begin or continue to think critically about nature and farmland and food and labor. These are things that it is often easy to take for granted, but they are complicated and difficult and so, so important for all of us.

For more information on how to preserve and/or create sustainable farmland in the Midwest, check out the nonprofit The Land Connection (shout-out to my Aunt Terra for founding it!) at thelandconnection.org. The Land Connection "trains farmers in resilient, restorative farming techniques; informs the public about the sources of our food and why that matters; and works to protect and enhance farmland so that we, and generations to come, will have clean air and water, fertile soil, and healthy, delicious food." The

website is full of resources for new farmers wanting access to land, or those with land who want to learn how to farm it more sustainably. There's also a donation page!

What have you been working on lately, and can we expect more from you soon?

My short story "Altamaha-ha," partly about a giant snake-fish and partly about what it means to love children who are not your own, is coming out in *States of Terror, Volume 3*. In addition to my short fiction, I'm also working on a novel about an art-school dropout who becomes the reluctant sidekick to a Manic Pixie Dream Guy who accidentally fractured his self and scattered the pieces all over the greater Chicago area.

I recently realized that I've been neglecting the performance side of things (or indeed anything that means walking further than the grocery store; Minnesota winters will do that to you), and I've resolved to start going to poetry and story slams around the Twin Cities again. Look for me at The Calof Series with Patrick's Cabaret, the OUTspoken! queer open mic, and The Not-So-Silent-Planet speculative fiction open mic!

For more information about upcoming developments in the real-world version of The Land, check out the following:

- For information about the family farms and the family writings, visit brockmanfamilyfarming.com. You can get on a CSA wait list, apply for an apprenticeship, or buy some jam from my mom. (Seriously, buy some of my mom's jam. It's delicious. So's the tea.)
- *Seasons of Change on Henry's Farm* (henrysfarmmovie.com) will be a film about my uncle's farm and "how it is possible to sustain ourselves in a shifting climate by mimicking the resilience of nature to cultivate biodiversity, healthy foods, and new farmers to steward the soil that sustains us all." This also has a donate page!
- And, finally, here's an article my Aunt Terra wrote about the continuing soil erosion in the Midwest: bit.ly/247oMSn.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Tara Sim is the author of *Timekeeper* (Sky Pony Press, Nov. 1, 2016) and can typically be found wandering the wilds of the Bay Area, California. When she's not chasing cats or lurking in bookstores, she writes books about magic, clocks, and explosives. Half-Indian and full geek, she eats too many samosas and awkwardly dances to Bhangra music. Follow her on Twitter at @EachStarAWorld, or check out her website at tarasim.com.

Author Spotlight: John Chu

Christian A. Coleman

The idea of double time, using time travel as a literal replay of the past and also as part of figure skating choreography, is spectacular! As we see at the end, it's also crucial to the emotional core of the story. Tell us where this idea came from.

"Double Time" started as a Clarion story. There was a streetlamp right next to the window in my dorm room. The upshot was that my room never really got dark. So, this idea may have come from sleep deprivation?

Seriously, a problem with trying to crank out a story a week (and, by the way, our instructors actually advised against doing this) is that you don't actually have time to do very much research. So, this story very much came out of my love of figure skating (and lack of need to do research about it).

(By the way, the story that finally got published is very much *not* the story I wrote at Clarion. When Julia Rios and Alisa Krasnostein asked me to submit a story to their anthology, *Kaleidoscope,* I thought of this Clarion story. Instead of revising it, though, I wrote a different story with the same speculative element, same main character, and same central relationship.)

Intersectionally speaking, Shelly is juggling a lot in this story: gaining approval from her mother and coach as a young adult; excelling on her own terms in a competitive sport; mastering time travel; and living up to the expectations of an immigrant upbringing. How did you choose a character like Shelly to tell this story?

Shelly evolved as I wrote. At the start, I knew that she was a Chinese-American girl. Despite the speculative element, I wanted the story to take place in more or less the present. Given that I wanted to write a figure skating story, that meant the mother had to be this huge Michelle Kwan fan. It's hard to overestimate the impact Michelle Kwan had on Chinese-Americans of a certain age. Everything else about Shelly more or less fell out of that.

I really appreciate how the story assumes the centrality of Shelly's being Chinese-American and steeps the narrative in her world. This approach is so important for readers starved for more inclusive fiction. How intentional was this approach when you sat down to write?

Completely intentional. The goal (even in the version I originally drafted at Clarion)

was always to portray a parent-child relationship rooted in the specifics of Chinese-American immigrant culture of a certain era.

You had a story published previously in Queers Destroy Science Fiction! What does it mean for you to destroy science fiction?

I've always taken the word "destroy" in this context somewhat ironically, as a way to reclaim the attempted insult sometimes deployed at women, the non-cis, the non-straight, people of color, or anyone else who is not of a dominant group. There is this weird, unfounded assumption that we have just recently sprung out of nowhere. For me, to "destroy science fiction" is to assert that we have always been here and we will always be here. Our work has always had an influence on the field and it always will.

Is there new work of yours that we can look forward to?

In March, *The Revelator* published "The Law and the Profits," a fantasy noir story that's tangentially related to *The Wizard of Oz*. A bonus point to anyone who works out what that relationship is. The reference in the text to the Emerald City is a red herring.

This summer I have two stories coming out. The Book Smugglers is publishing "How to Piss Off a Failed Super-Soldier" as part of their Year of the Superhero. Also, Twelve Planet Press is publishing "Selected Afterimages of the Fading" in *Defying Doomsday,* an anthology of apocalyptic science fiction focused on disabled and non-neurotypical characters.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at @coleman_II.

Author Spotlight: Vandana Singh

JY Yang

The premise behind "Delhi" was fascinating: People who are connected over vast stretches of time, over the same geography. Could you tell us a little more about what inspired this story?

Well, I was born and raised in Delhi. I took it for granted until I left in my twenties, when observing it from a far shore made me realize just how extraordinary a place it is. I had lived next door to history and drama and never really noticed. Growing up, there were always medieval ruins somewhere in the neighborhood that my brother and I would explore. At one time we lived near an old tomb occupied by a milkman and his family, including his cows. A lot has changed in Delhi since those days—while it has always changed, the changes now are so fast it is nearly impossible to keep up. So every visit home I have to reacquaint myself with it. But despite the madness of urban sprawl, the places where I grew up are mostly still there—you can still imagine, in the midst of crazy traffic or in a busy shopping center, the dramas of history, and characters famous and ordinary who must have walked in and lived in some of the same areas.

I am still a Delhiite, no matter where I live—my formative years, the adventures of my childhood and early adulthood took place there. So it is inevitable that I would write about it—it was only the third story I published, I think. I had all these thoughts and impressions about Delhi, and history, and change, and this is how I made sense of it.

In this story, the titular city of Delhi is like a character in its own right. You draw heavily upon its architecture and past in the storytelling. How often do the history and geography of your settings play a role in your writing?

I really believe in place as character. Modern humans like to pretend geography is not important, since we can now live in deserts or mountaintops, but that is really an illusion. Geography shapes us, shapes our cultures and our imaginations, and in that sense, place *is* character. I am very much affected by place—whether it is a concrete jungle or wilderness. As a physicist, I am particularly aware that matter speaks—through physical laws, through constant interaction with its surroundings. So I can't ignore it, can't shut it out and pretend that only humans exist. History is also crucial. We are a storytelling species, and when we tell stories of the past, we select things to talk about and leave other things out. We weave events into patterns with narrative interest. Especially because I come from a once-colonized country, and because I am among the early generations of people born in a free India, I am interested in interrogating, contextualizing and connecting with my own history—a part of a decolonizing process, I think. So by

writing this story I was able to—through Aseem—talk to Delhi's past inhabitants, situate myself as part of something larger to which I belong in space and time—and although I can move in and out of Delhi, unlike Aseem, I am formed by it, haunted by it. So you might say, fancifully, that I am its instrument—the city is writing one version of its story through my eyes.

I was fascinated by the bare glimpses we were shown of the segregated Delhi of the future. Was this riffed off social fractures present in the city of today, or was that stark vision inspired by something else?

Colonialism exacerbated existing social inequalities and introduced new forms. In the past three decades, globalization and neoliberalism have deepened these fractures to an extent that is hard to believe—the Indian rich live shamelessly opulent lives, and while the middle class is growing and thriving, the majority of the population remains poor. Farmer suicides, the displacement of peoples from their historical lands in favor of corporations and profiteering, the continued mass migration of such peoples to cities like Delhi—all I had to do was to extrapolate some of these trends into the future. Yet there is always resistance. I'm not talking only about individual personal resistance, but also alliances between one person and another, and between communities in the face of oppression and exploitation. In this story, Aseem is very much alone at the start, but as he begins to understand his entanglements with the city and with history, and also with the people around him, he starts to make these alliances.

What I loved about this piece is the way you seamlessly blended tropes from fantasy and science fiction: The mysticism and fates mixed with pieces of a dystopian future. How do you approach genre in your writing? Do you think of it at all?

I don't think of genre at all, when I am writing. Usually the way I write is to start with a sentence that comes into my head, along with a character and a setting. I rarely have much idea where it is going to go. I have to write the story to find out. My unconscious picks random threads and weaves them together. For instance I have been interested in complex systems for a long time, and that is certainly a thread that is important in this story. A city as a complex system, as a kind of organism that might eventually become sentient (in a way analogous to life arising as an emergent phenomenon from "mere" chemistry)—these things fascinate me both because of my scientific background and because I am a writer. I am also interested in time, which from a physics perspective is far more interesting than the way we think about it in everyday life. Laws of nature (so far as we know) forbid traveling back in time (unless we can resolve certain paradoxes) but the only instrument that can do so, if imperfectly, is memory and imagination. So it came

to me as I was writing the story that perhaps a man's brain, if it was somewhat abnormal, could go beyond his own past to jumping back and forth along the time axis, but in a way that would either *not* affect history or *enable* it. Fun ideas to play with!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

JY Yang is a lapsed scientist, a former journalist, and a short story writer. She lives in Singapore, in a bubble populated by her imagination and an indeterminate number of succulent plants named Lars. A graduate of the 2013 class of Clarion West, her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons,* and *Apex,* among others. A list of her publications can be found at misshallelujah.net, and she can be found on Twitter as @halleluyang, grumbling about Scandinavian languages and making displeased noises about the state of the world.

Author Spotlight: Edmée Pardo

JY Yang

In "1965," you interwove the story of two families over several decades, and tied them to larger happenings in the world (Mars missions, Y2K, etc). Tell us a little about why you chose this structure.

In 2006, images of a face in the Mars landscape were published. The pictures impressed me enough not only to not forget them, but to use them later in a short story. When I traced when interest in Mars exploded, it turned out that Martian images were also released the year I was born, 1965. I saw a connection between a personal life and a world-wide event. So I chose to tie them up and make that event the beginning of the story, and to place at the end the images that shocked me while I was walking in the street and passed near a newspaper kiosk.

You dedicated "1965" to your sister. How personal is this story to you?

The story is made from personal references (the least), imagination (the most), and real facts that were needed to support the story. Indeed I have a sister two years older than me whom I love dearly, and I took the opportunity to dedicate this story to her. I also have two younger brothers that aren't mentioned in the story, but one of them has a UFO obsession, which I placed into the mother of the story, who is not my real mother, but a fictional one; but we all lived in the neighborhood mentioned in the narration. I never had a friend named Paz, nor have I met the judo instructor Márquez, whom I needed in the story to add a real fact. So to place Márquez, I needed to create Paz and the relationship between the mother of the story and the narrator's friend. So the story has auto-references but is not personal, nor biographical.

One thing that stood out to me was the absence of men in the story—both Paz and the narrator's fathers are absent both from their daughters' growing up, as well as from the bulk of the narrative. Was this a deliberate choice, and if so, why?

This was not a deliberate choice in terms of ideology, I just didn't need men in the plot. But as I see it now as a reader and not as the author, Mars represents the passion, the warrior, the male energy by default, and all the story goes around it. In that sense, the absence of "real men" is supplied by *the* male energy that puts some of our characters in motion.

The version of "1965" that runs in this issue is a translation. Do you think translation affects the meaning of the story? Are there things—not necessarily in this story—that you think are untranslatable?

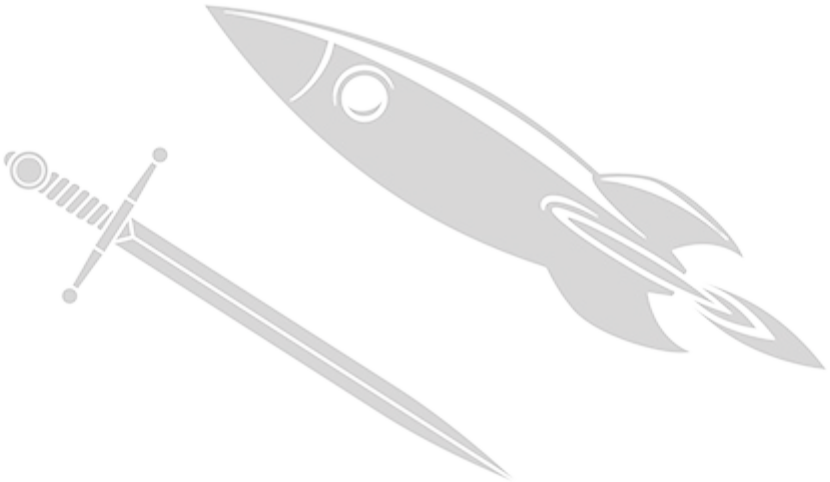
No, I don't think anything is missing; the job of Lesly Betancourt-González is great and I thank her for that. Reading my voice in another language is a full experience; that voice seems to belong to a writer whom I would like to read more. In that sense, the sound of my own Mexican-Spanish voice (in my opinion) is untranslatable; the one I read is a better one.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

JY Yang is a lapsed scientist, a former journalist, and a short story writer. She lives in Singapore, in a bubble populated by her imagination and an indeterminate number of succulent plants named Lars. A graduate of the 2013 class of Clarion West, her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons,* and *Apex,* among others. A list of her publications can be found at misshallelujah.net, and she can be found on Twitter as @halleluyang, grumbling about Scandinavian languages and making displeased noises about the state of the world.

NONFICTION

EDITED BY GRACE L. DILLON



Because Some of Us Survived

Samantha L. Taylor | 1,200 words

On one of the early mornings that I spent conceiving of this essay, I was awakened at 4:00 a.m. by thoughts on our incessant survival. How people of color did not design the rules we are forced to use to play the game. How many of us owe our existence to the fact that generations before us sought to destroy rather than heel or concede.

Maybe that is why I find myself ruminating over the title of this special edition of *Lightspeed Magazine:* POC Destroy Science Fiction! We destroy it because, in part, that is what we have always had to do. In order to publish, people of color have worked in solidarity—together—outside of the system as it currently exists. I can say with total honesty that white editors have rejected submissions from me 100% of the time. That is not to say that every single thing I have submitted deserved to appear in print; my ego is not *that* big. Rejection is a part of every writer's experience. However, knowing that racism and anti-Blackness are systemically entrenched in mainstream institutional operations, including the publishing industry, I do not take my experiences with white editors and publishers as coincidental. The American publishing scene is based on the myth of meritocracy and often excuses the work of people of color as dim and inarticulate or, worse, irrelevant. It is a place where white authors use Asian pen names and manage to create entire races of Elves and other "other" beings, but rarely develop empathetic Brown and Black human characters. This is why POC must destroy SF.

As an emerging SF writer, I've had discouraging experiences for the most part. I do not take them lightly. In fact, it is precisely this part of our legacy that has pushed me to continue my Ancestors' work; it has kept me writing (and submitting!) and has inspired my work as a community organizer. Currently, I am sitting with the tender words of authors who do not explicitly write science fiction, and yet they weave worlds that cradle creativity and inspire innovation for me as a Black femme writer.

On this morning, I am thinking of James Baldwin, Linda Hogan (Chickasaw), and Lucille Clifton. Fiction authors and poets. Black and Native. People whose words witness the violence of the past, illuminate the persistence of injustice in the present, and provide hope for the future.

Once I watched James Baldwin respond to an interview question about Black despair and *"the world."* His face creased into a wide grin, revealing those Nigerian Diaspora gap teeth he is so well known for. "I can't afford despair . . . you can't tell the children there is no hope" (Silveira, Carolyn. "The Interviewer Asks Him About Despair. His Smile Says Even More Than His Words." Upworthy: u.pw/1SOjdQp). What do you do when, like Baldwin, you can no longer afford despair, but the experience of being both Black and gay in the United States is stifling? We might leave this world behind in search of one that can sustain our otherness—our queerness—and our dreams. And when we cannot physically leave this morbid home, we can imagine and write about where we

would go. Probably somewhere humid, where we can sweat out the toxicity of this lifetime. The place we create for and with the children, lest our words make liars out of us.

I first encountered Linda Hogan's words in Deborah A. Miranda's (Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen, Chumash, and Jewish) book, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*. Miranda evokes Ancestral reverence when she presents Hogan's words, "I am the result of the love of thousands," between a photograph of her parents and a note that they survived the social injustice and violence of their time together. I believe Hogan's statement is a nod to Indigenous Futurisms. She could just as easily have written something like *I exist in spite of genocide, colonialism, and cultural erasure,* a statement which would have been just as true and just as valid. Instead of centering the fracturing of tribal people such as herself and Miranda, she turns instead to the power of love, a force that pushes spring's first buds from the earth. Nothing but nature's love for herself and posterity bring her return to lush life year after year, exemplifying resilience. Hogan's words remind me that POC writers are those buds. The fractured existence of countless generations have seeded the worlds we imagine, the kind of worlds our Ancestors dreamed us living in.

Lucille Clifton's poem, "won't you celebrate with me," is a manifesto for inhabiting this dream and creating one's self without a blueprint, using nothing more than what exists between the starshine and the clay—any and all things, tangible and intangible. She asks, "what i have shaped into / a kind of life? i had no model. / born in Babylon / both nonwhite and woman." For me, Clifton's bridge is the meeting place for Black weirdos. It is where I sit on the lap of Oya, in the eye of the storm, reaching out into the melee to pluck what I need from the chaos, drama, and violence surrounding non-white, woman, and queer authors in this lifetime. Moving through this violence means that many somethings have tried to kill me, yet here I am. Writing. With nature's own resiliency.

Baldwin, Hogan, Clifton, and Miranda cannot be neatly situated in the SF genre, though they do create room to dream. They let us slip through their personal truths; inviting us to create new worlds from them, with them. They share with us healthy servings of reality, with sides of intuitive imagination. Their literary gifts encourage us to survive so that one day we may know what it is to thrive.

People of color destroy science fiction particularly because we have survived. We are here to remind each other and ourselves that our personal and shared histories are not fungible. We will not concede to the repression of our craft as we live the dreams of our Ancestors. They endured so that we could *be*. To exist in Diaspora—to thrive in it—requires creativity. What is more SF than surviving and thriving (and writing!) in a world in which we were never meant to exist? (Reference: Lorde, Audre. "A Litany for Survival." *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: Norton, 1997)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha L. Taylor is a Black queer weirdo who's just trying to survive and thrive in the Pacific Northwest.

Doing *Dhalgren*

Terence Taylor | 1,500 words

> *"Things have made you what you are . . . What you are will make you what you will become."*
>
> —Excerpt from Samuel R. Delany's *Dhalgren*

I read Delany's legendary novel *Dhalgren,* published in 1974, for the first time on the way to Readercon 2015, after a friend told me they were seeking a writer of color to add to a panel on the novel. Surprised they hadn't thought of that sooner, I found out that they'd been looking at length, but hadn't found any of us who'd read it or were willing to take it on for that. For the POC writing community, I decided to throw myself on the grenade of reading in a day a novel over a thousand pages long in ebook with a reputation as being "difficult." Like the Statue of Liberty I always see from the elevated F train, I knew it was important, but getting to it had always seemed like too much trouble.

I'm glad I finally did.

Blessed with reading quickly with comprehension, I started it on the train up to the convention and finished a bare hour before the panel began the next day. Reading it nonstop was remarkable, and I recommend doing *Dhalgren* over a three-day weekend with no other plans, like mescaline or mushrooms. The novel takes you through multiple stages of reality and is like a hallucinogenic trip in its nuance, range of experience, and the way it sucks you into an alternate reality. I want to offer a possible key to unlocking it for new readers of all races, but particularly of color, as it is part of our literary legacy, in order to encourage you to forget its reputation and read a justifiably renowned work of prose poetry that was a bestseller when it came out.

Landy, the hero Kid's first lover in the lost city of Bellona, says about his work, "I'm delighted by its skill and moved by its wealth of substance, which surprised me because I didn't think I was going to be." That's how I felt, having heard *Dhalgren* was going to be hard to get through, but I was quickly pulled in. The trick is not to tarry over the early text for meaning, but to keep moving. This is word jazz, like the cut-up novels of William Burroughs such as *Nova Express,* or Kerouac's *On the Road.* Just go with the flow. These are the disoriented thoughts of an amnesiac. You'll find familiar ground when Kid does, after he reaches Bellona.

It's eerily contemporary. As I read Kid's arrival I thought of Detroit, Baltimore, Flint, New Orleans . . . I see Bellona as where a lot of spiraling American cities are right now. Despite that, *Dhalgren* isn't your usual dystopian novel; at the end, life goes on. There are cataclysmic events, looming catastrophe, but more as a sideshow to the characters' lives than an actual end to their world.

Our hero enters a society that's dissipated, but it's stagnant decay, collapsed entropy

that's fallen as far as it can and can't get up the strength to release the last of its energy. There's no real order, but the city functions, citizens still sustain themselves. The first thing new people are asked is, "Are you hungry? We can feed you."

The level of danger has escalated to snipers and street fights, but it's a vague violence at the same level as that of New York or L.A., where you hear of gangs and shootings, but usually elsewhere. This is an everyday apocalypse where everyone goes about his or her business. They have random conversations we've all had, which gives it a wonderfully prosaic style that's easy to identify with because we've lived those moments, we've had those conversations, and we've tumbled in and out of those beds.

To me, *Dhalgren* is a surrealist prose opera—a series of Socratic debates punctuated by self-defining arias. One of my favorite passages is when the seemingly deluded Mrs. Richards goes on for pages that explicitly make it clear that she understands everything going on in her world and that she's rejected it, that she is embracing the opposite of entropy.

She's clinging to a system that no longer exists, writing letters to building management to move upstairs in a city that doesn't even have a police force, and each of the characters gets their spotlight. Everyone tells Kid who they are, what they are, what they believe, and it's not until the end that he gets to say, "I know who I am", as if hearing all their stories and writing them down is what tells him who he is. *That's* when Kid can leave Bellona, after his work has given him an identity.

He begins writing almost unconsciously, as in a surrealist dream state, strings of words that express images and ideas, built around work found in the pages of an anonymous notebook he finds on his arrival that mysteriously may or may not be his own, words eventually even published as his.

Encouraged by the acclaimed poet Ernest Newboy, who leads him through the processes of publication and public perception, The Kid or Kidd—creative child or plagiarizing pirate?—finds success based more on others' ideas of who and what he is than his own, which leads him to a deeper, truer examination of himself, his world, and his ability to represent it in words.

Presented as a Candide-like naïf when he walks in, Kid writes short blasts of poetry that are transcendent, and then the narrative goes back to "he scratched his ass." That phasing between the sacred and profane—from what I call the characters' arias, and the poetic bursts of divine revelation that are Kid's arias spread throughout the book, to the ordinary world we know—is what makes the novel so effective. It's a place that's alien in many ways, but completely familiar in all others. Delany places Bellona so firmly in real life that you can't tell where fantasy begins or ends, which is what makes it feel so believable.

From the snatches we see of Kid's work in the first half of the novel, we move on to snippets of prose written in the first person as if from his notebook. It is content freed of form, the kind of reportage found in writers' journals, threads of life we weave into narrative. The reader moves from a story about a writer's life to his own words on his

world—from outside Kid we go inside him to a deeper truth, no matter how fragmentary.

Though he cannot fully name himself by the end, he finds himself, and in that discovery is freed to leave and pass the torch, in this case the ominous orchid, on to the next generation. His words to Bill, "I know . . . who I am now. Who are you?" issue the challenge all effective authors offer their readers. Essentially it's what Kid is asked as he arrives and what he asks of the next travelers to Bellona who he meets as he departs.

Dhalgren takes root and blossoms in the mind of the reader. It plants so many ideas that it takes time for some to become recognizable. I suspect that each time I read it, the novel could reveal something new, but after this reading I feel what Delany says is that a writer must abandon traditional roads to find his or her voice, and to seek literary freedom and success by entering unknown territory unafraid.

At heart, I see *Dhalgren* as an epic tale of the rite of passage every serious writer takes, Orpheus's descent into the underworld as a search for self, for lost identity and not lost love. Kid's journey to and through Bellona, named for a goddess of war, is the rocky road every storyteller travels. A writer's purpose is to discover who they are, what they have to say and how to say it. *Dhalgren* portrays that in a poetic epic that carries its hero from amnesia to absolute awareness. Far from being difficult, it is essential reading for any writer seeking a way through the art, craft, and consequences of writing, if nothing else as a joyous example of the infinite potential of the written word.

This is the spine of the story's skeleton for me, the arc it follows from beginning to end. Delany's lyrical prose is laid over that, philosophical passages that require deeper, more detailed examination to be fully appreciated. These are the parts of the book readers go back to reread and what I intend to revisit over time, sure I will find new meaning each time I do.

That is what makes it a classic, one to be read, and I'm glad I finally did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terence Taylor (terencetaylor.com) is an award-winning children's television writer whose work has appeared on PBS, Nickelodeon, and Disney, among many others. As an author of fiction, his first published short story, "Plaything," appeared in *Dark Dreams,* the first horror/suspense anthology of African-American authors. He was one of a handful of authors to be included in the next two volumes, with "The Share" in *Voices from the Other Side* and "WET PAIN" in *Whispers in the Night.* Terence is also author of the first two novels of his Vampire Testaments trilogy, *Bite Marks* and *Blood Pressure.* After a two-year hiatus he has returned to the conclusion, *Past Life.* Find him on Twitter @vamptestaments.

The Thunderbird's Path: Indigenous Seeds of Science Fiction

Misha Nogha | 2,700 words

Woman of the southern cross am I
Woman of the first star am I
Woman of the Star God am I
For I go up to the sky.
—Maria Sabina, Curandera from Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom*

While night walking in snaking snow under a blue blanket of stars, I have to stop and gaze at the stars no matter how bitter cold it is. I can't help it. Even as a little girl in the deep freeze of Minnesota winters, the stars whispered, "Made you look." Back then, stargazers were relatively unimpeded by light pollution, and it was easy to get lost in the bling of stars and the glow of planets. I was told by my Métis grandfather, that it was unbecoming to stare at the Milky Way, the Thunderbird's Path, because the Thunder beings were not to be disrespected by gawking. So even though I am now about science and, yes, science fiction, and say to myself, sometimes the Milky Way is just stars, I do still clasp the talismanic meteorite medallion I wear as a sort of magical protection. But it is hard to look away from a flight of stars gliding silently overhead like a flock of snowy owls. There is a fishing pole there, commonly known as Orion's belt, and I always am hooked by it, and following the line to the red fish Aldebaran in the V flock of snow geese known as Taurus's head and from there my eyes leap to a cluster of seven blue crystal stars hanging on the long neck of the night. Cree scientist Wilfred Buck calls them the Mattotasin Assinuk, the sweat lodge stars, who represent seven uncles who became seven stones and warm the lodge. From this lodge tumbles out a multitude of emergence tales like a sky basket of crystal balls, landing in primitive dwellings, reflecting prismatically on cave walls and bringing the communal knowledge of the cosmos.

The Pleiadean Portal and the womb of the Sky Goddess

The Pleiades are about 450 light years from our solar system, a middle-aged constellation of hot blue extra luminous stars and an open constellation. It contains seven prominent stars with six readily seen by the naked eye. But historically it has commanded attention from indigenous people all over the planet. They lift up their faces and point with their lips and say, almost in unison, "There, that's where our people come from. And it is to the Pleiades we will someday return." It is so well-used, and so oft repeated in oral tradition, that perhaps all multicultural dialogs could begin well by silently pointing to the Pleiades. In fact, if anecdotal evidence from these tales was accepted as science fact and not science fiction, it would be a well-known given that we are descended from aliens who came, originally, from the Pleiades.

Astronomical anthropologists say the Pleiades were a constellation of wonder only because of their heliacal nature, showing up in fall and blazing away until spring, and that its importance was mainly as a seasonal marker. The Pleiades then were the marker of planting and harvesting. But after reading hundreds and hundreds of creation tales, tales of star people, and looking at cosmic maps on everything from parietal arches to shamans' drums, evidence points to the fact that it was much more than that. The Pleiades speak to common ancestry, from some hole in that cluster of stars way off the edge of Taurus.

The Pleiades are described as a lodge, a basket, a sieve, and in many cases a womb. In fact, roughly put, even a sweat lodge is a representation of the womb of Mother Earth. In cultures that revere sky goddesses, the Pleiades are said to be the womb with seven daughters. The Altai of North Asia tell stories of Ome Niang Niang as the womb goddess, and images of her depict her with seven daughters, representing the Pleiades. There are numerous tales of this emergence from the Pleiades, from the Dreamtime tales of Australian Aboriginals to the Daughters of the Night of the Tuareg Berbers, from the Mushin of Buryats of Mongolia to the Kachina sky people of the Zuni and Quichua Mayans. There is a pattern often told: Pleiade people emerge from some hole in the cosmos, then are let down by a silver cord, and they either are or are part of a group of Star people instrumental in creating human beings. All these cultures call them "The ancestors." They also add, "from the stars we came and to the stars we will return." Sometimes that is taken to mean crossing the River in the Sky World (Milky Way) into the next life, and sometimes it seems to indicate a journey through that portal while still living.

When Albert Einstein and Nathan Rosen theorized in 1935 that wormholes and bridges across the space-time continuum were possible, it soon became such a common device used in science fiction stories and movies as to almost be a cliché. The players may be from the present, the past, or the future, but the readers or viewers accept that in theoretical physics a wormhole is transversable between huge parsecs of space, or can be used for time travel, or even travel into the multitude of universes. However, I posit that examining the Pleiadean original tales from indigenous peoples points to a pre-historical understanding of the wormhole possibility long before it was defined by mathematics. You read about modern indigenous people using the word *wormhole* now to explain that hole in the Pleiades that ties us to the cosmic, and so astronomical archeologists posit that the wormhole ideas were borrowed from modern physics and not part of the early legend. However, before they used that word, they used the metaphor of a silver cord that connects the two ends of the hole. Perhaps it was a plasma tube of some sort, upon which people can travel both directions. In short, when they say, "we have met the aliens and they are us," the idea was accepted long before it was popularized in modern science fiction.

Star People, Sky Spirits, or Celestial Celebrities?

When the ancestors of indigenous people spoke about *Star People,* they seemed to be referring to something in addition to the sky beings who are purely spiritual entities. Star people (aliens?) seem to be able to intermingle with humans on a biological basis, not just a soul-communing way.

Who were these Star People and what did they do here? In some stories like the Mongolian Epic poem of Abai Geser, they were benign, almost god-like beings who attempted to help alleviate human suffering through teaching them about spiritual enlightenment, advanced technology, plant healing, and the practice of shamanism. They come also from the "Mushin," a Buryat term for the Pleiades. According to the legend of Abai Geser, at one point humans were living in a very advanced technological society and then somehow lost their way and were once again living in a state of disease and decay and subsisted in an ignorant way by digging in the dirt with sticks. At the same time, human beings had also lost their spiritual axis, lost the art of shamanic healing, and were behaving badly, most notably disrespectful to nature. Consequently the Star People, Tenger, met together in the Pleiades to see what they could do and sent down an instructor to teach them how to craft metal ores again, and also shamanize properly again. Being humans, though, the people seemed to have lost their way repeatedly and subsequent visitations from star people once again help set things right. Modern anthropology sees these Tenger as "gods," but that is not the right word from Mongolian translation; they are *higher beings,* but also have distinctly human forms and attributes, albeit somewhat heightened abilities. These Tenger came down to reverse a devolution in the sense of a loss of knowledge on both a technological and spiritual basis. (I will add here that not all of those Star People wanted to help human beings; some of them thought it was best to follow a scorched earth policy and wipe them all out as a failed species. Eventually an epic battle between these two factions ensued, one that is speculatively still being fought.)

Other indigenous Star People stories are more specifically about rescuing people from a situation and actually bringing them up into the sky, generally to never return, or said to return at a later date. One can't help but wonder if the portal is at times closed and will reopen again in the future. If it is theoretical movement through a space-time continuum, what may be hundreds of years or maybe even several millennia in Earth time is just a few moments from the other end of the portal. Modern physics is beginning to have an inkling of what that means for modern space travelers, and those of us who may be waiting for their return.

In the story of the Pleiades in Aboriginal Australia, the sisters are from a certain Napaljarri tribe and they are trying to escape the unwanted attention of a Jukamara man who wishes to take one of them as a wife. The cross between these two skin groups is not acceptable, and the sisters are hauled up into the sky with a rope (cord) by a Star Woman who puts them into a canoe where they can paddle through the Dreamtime of the Cosmos far ahead of their pursuer, i.e. the Morning Star. These seven sisters eventually become encrusted with blue crystal and shine as the Pleiades themselves.

Another tale of rescue or escape is the very well known tale of Mato Tipila, (Bear

Tower) popular in Lakota and other Plains tribes' mythology. In this story seven blue stone sisters were far from their village picking berries. An angry bear spotted them and began to chase them. Though they bolted to make it back to the tipis, the bear was overtaking them faster than they could run, and so they clambered up on a small boulder and began to pray to the spirit of that stone to save them. The stone person was an ancestor of theirs and heard their prayers, and was softened by their tears, and the stone began to rise beyond the reach of the bear. The bear clawed at the boulder, but it kept thrusting up to the sky to safety, where they became the shining blue stones of the Pleiades. Was the stone actually some form of intergalactic travel?

There are several stories in which Star People come to Earth to find husbands and wives. In the Athabaskan tale of two sisters who married Star Men, there are a pair of sisters who are lying around a campfire and looking at the night sky. They see two Star People they like and wish that they could marry them. The Star Men hear their wishes, and soon enough they have joined them by the fire and propose to the two girls. The girls agree and go up to the stars to live with their Star husbands. Eventually they miss their families and slide down on a silver cord back to Earth. The Star Men come looking for them but they tell the girls that they can't bring them back up anymore. Perhaps this is just an indicator that portals are not always and everywhere open.

Petroglyphs and Pictographs as Post-It Notes

Star people and portals and lone stars and actual constellations, most notable of those the Pleiades, are depicted in ancient cosmic maps on rocks, walls, parietal pictographs, and on carvings. There is a lot of speculation as to which images are numinous spirit beings, which are human shamans in trances, and which are actually depicting Star People, aka aliens. I think the only way to know that for sure is to ask the people that still live there which image represents which.

The longest continuous cycle of ancestral stories we know about are those of the Aboriginal Australians who have passed down their emergence legends for over 40,000 years. A very detailed image of Star People was made by the Worora people of Australia and contains Wandjina. They are called Sky People but are said to have originated from the Milky Way and helped create human beings. These Star People are said to be aliens, and indeed for the modern viewer they resemble the cryptological creature called "Greys" by a lot of science fiction enthusiasts as well as UFO-ologists. Whether these are "real" Star People or not, and thus part of our human DNA, cannot be proven nor disproven, because we have no alien DNA to measure our human DNA against. But just for the sake of tales told throughout time, these cave images are certainly compelling. In creation tales, these Wandjina beings are said to come from the Milky Way.

Boxy looking figures in Sego canyon are thought by some to be spirit beings of ancient shamans, yet some Ute Native Americans say they are actually Star People and not shamanic visitors.

Of course some of the more well known Star People rock art involves carvings, such as Olmec heads believed to be wearing space helmets. And one of the more colossal images is of the astronaut-looking figure in the Nazca lines of Peru. Neither of these views can be corroborated, since the people who once lived there are now dispersed.

Most early cultures pecked out painted or carved spirals and concentric circles in rock or on drums and other sacred objects. These may represent either actual portals into space and time, or between the upper, lower, and middle world, which is shamanic territory. It's possible that these two symbols were used for both. Indigenous peoples of ancient and current times do not necessarily see a difference or demarcation between the sacred and the mundane as modern Western culture does. Naturally, there are many places that do indeed have rather stark and obvious images of the Pleiades. Of course they do, if we are talking about Star People or emergence stories. A Post-it note that says, "So starting at the Pleiades, and from there moving on we have . . ."

In the end, a person could argue that the myths and tales of indigenous people do not fall into the category of science fiction, which according to the *Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction* suggests that the first science fiction story was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* published in 1818. Yet undeniably many of the elements popular in modern science fiction, such as wormholes, star travel, and aliens, do appear in these tales, and from these myths a lot of our modern themes spring forth.

As an addendum, I would like to give a word of caution, if you are looking at the Thunderbird's Path, as the Milky Way is called by the Anishnaabeg, it is advisable to maintain that it is merely comprised of flaming gaseous stars and star dust and not actual thunder spirit beings. I admit to looking longingly at the Milky Way that night of galactic cold, and before I could finish this piece of writing, lightning struck my Wi-Fi tower. It also wiped out my essay, my sources, and my notes, all of which had to be reconstructed while waiting for Wi-Fi service to reconnect so I could actually submit this text. I should have listened to my grandfather and stuck with the Pleiades only! It is wise to be wise, so I placed my tobacco on the blanket of snow and I am still averting my eyes, clasping my meteorite medallion, and dancing back and forth across the shifting snows of the sacred and mundane.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Of Métis (Cree) and Nordic descent, Misha Nogha writes, works, and lives on her small farm in northeastern Oregon where she raises a few Angus cattle and rides her Mustang horse.

Music Medicine

Zainab Amadahy | 1,600 words

As someone with a medical science background, I had a love/hate relationship with the TV series *Battlestar Galactica* (BG). The show was politically provocative and the character relationships dynamic, but the level of medical technology for a spacefaring society felt less advanced than what we have today, much less a society capable of traveling the galaxy.

I mean, cancer? There are several medical treatments that promise to eliminate forms of that disease in the next decade or so. And several holistic approaches that claim to have the cure for many types of the disease already. BG is not the only example of futurism that fails to extrapolate on the exciting future of medicine.

For instance, given the rapid developments in cutting-edge biofield research, there's no reason why Luke Skywalker couldn't have grown his hand back after Vader sliced it off. Or why some rogue scientist on *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* doesn't arise with the right frequency of sound that could turn anyone into an inhuman. Or devolve an inhuman back to her/his original state. What if Sick Bay on the *Enterprise* consisted of cubicles where patients listened to music in order to heal; to regenerate organs using the sound frequencies of healthy DNA? Music could represent a new twist to Dr. McCoy's magical medical technology.

Emerging biofield science promises to transform our entire approach to allopathic healthcare. Dr. Richard Gerber, MD, in *Vibrational Medicine* (March 2001), defines biofield as "the energy field that surrounds and interpenetrates the physical body. The biofield is made up of magnetic and electromagnetic energies generated by living cells."

My own definition of the biofield is that it's a collection of energy fields produced by and interacting with the body; being influenced by and influencing the body's structure and function.

According to "Biofield Science and Healing: An Emerging Frontier in Medicine", *Global Advances in Health and Medicine, November 2015,* the term biofield was coined in 1992 at a National Institutes of Health conference, where it was defined as "a massless field, not necessarily electromagnetic, that surrounds and permeates living bodies and affects the body." (Okay, clinicians and researchers aren't writers so don't sweat the awkward sentencing.) The term *biofield* is a Medical Subject Heading (MeSH term) at the National Library of Medicine. The National Institutes of Health and several pharmaceutical companies are currently investing in research that will map the body's bioelectromagnetic fields with the hope of developing technologies that have clinical applications. The predominant idea behind that hope is that introducing healthy frequencies of light, sound, or other forms of electro-magnetism to the biofield, or parts of it, will catalyze a syncing up of unhealthy vibrational patterns to healthy ones, thus positively impacting body tissues at the cellular level.

When I started reading about biofield research, I couldn't help but note the parallels between the theoretical science and wellness paradigms offered by many wisdom and Indigenous knowledge traditions. According to several researchers, "Biofield concepts are rooted in indigenous schools of medicine, as evidenced by 'whole medical systems' practices such as Chinese, Tibetan, Native American, African and Ayurvedic medicine" ("Biofield Science and Healing: An Emerging Frontier in Medicine"). Many of these cultural wellness practices are energy-based, meaning they focus more on manipulating, relocating, and restoring vibrational frequencies of the body's various energy fields or currents to accelerate healing and maintain wellness.

We've had medical technologies that measure bio-energy or treat the body with energy frequencies for a long time, such as electroencephalograms (EEGs) and electrocardiograms (ECGs), which are concerned with the body's electrical output. Electric shocks are used in cases of cardiac arrest to revive the heart. UV light is applied to breakdown bilirubin in the bloodstream when the liver isn't doing the job. Blue light helps relieve the depression and physical pain of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Laser light is used to perform delicate surgeries and reduce tissue inflammation. Ultrasound is routinely employed to image fetuses in utero as well as other organs, and to treat many conditions such as gallstones. These are only a few examples of how modern medicine is already using energy technologies to treat illness.

Today subtle biofield energies can be detected and measured by technologies like high-voltage electrophotography, SQUID magnetometers, and other equipment. The technology is in the very earliest stages of development, and the Russians seem to be way ahead of anyone else in the field, according to former NASA physicist Claude Swanson, who researches, lectures, and writes about the biofield. (Ensign Chekov would be proud.)

I am thrilled to discover increasingly more publications in the discipline of biofield research, particularly because it's another way of storying ancient and modern holistic practices that have been and are using frequencies of light and sound to invoke the body's self-healing capacities. What the emerging science speaks to is that there is validity in the much ridiculed, denigrated, and ignored healing practices of many cultures.

To take music as an example, it has been used in the ceremonies of Native American medicine societies for millennia. From Buddhist chants to the drum rhythms of Santeria to Hindu mantras, the use of sound vibrations to heal is common across world cultures. In my recent studies of curanderismo as practiced in New Mexico and the Southwestern United States, music is similarly regarded as a tool of healing and wellness.

The most astounding (and admittedly controversial) research findings that will inform my futurist writings come from Russian scientist Dr. Peter Gariaev's work on Wave Genetics. Gariaev notes that while many genetic researchers are still approaching the science through the framework of molecular interactions, splicing and transplanting genetic material, for example, his work has been about decoding interactions between DNA and biofield energies. He has found, and others have corroborated, that DNA emits distinctive sound frequencies. The signature frequencies are unique to every individual. If

I understand the science correctly, each organ contributes its own unique frequency to the individual's signature, as does each cell to the organ.

At Canada's University of Toronto in 2001, Gariaev and his team accomplished something astounding. (Trigger warning for animal rights activists like myself: You might find the experiment I recount here ethically repugnant, but I have chosen to describe it to make my point on the staggering possibilities offered by Wave Genetics.)

In this experiment Geriaev poisoned two groups of lab rats to intentionally destroy their pancreases. The control group of rats got no treatment and eventually died. The test group received a novel form of light therapy. Geriaev was able to transcribe the "music" or sound frequencies made by the DNA of a healthy rat pancreas. He translated those sounds into light frequencies and treated the dying rats with lasers. The rats thus treated regenerated their pancreases and survived.

Later, back in Russia, Geriaev continued his research. He reports that he was able to restore hair on a man's bald spot with information from stem cells extracted from the bulb of a hair follicle plucked from elsewhere on the head.

In a third notable experiment, Geriaev treated the pancreas of a sixty-year-old Russian woman who suffered from diabetes. The treatment consisted of laser light therapy, derived from sound frequencies recorded from the DNA of the woman's grandson. The boy had been teething at the time the sample was recorded. After treatment had started, the woman began to complain of headaches. The doctors discontinued her treatment and did several scans to find out what might be the problem. What they found was that she was teething; growing new teeth in her jaw! The pain came not just from the ordinary inflammation caused by teething, but also from the fact that the woman had had all her teeth pulled earlier in life, and at this point had a mouth full of prosthetics that blocked the incoming teeth.

The surprising outcomes of this experiment raise countless questions. Among them: Can DNA sound frequencies from healthy cells regenerate unhealthy ones? Can we record our DNA sound frequencies from times in our childhood when we were healthy and use them to maintain our youth and vibrancy or heal from illness? Can inherited genetic damage be repaired, possibly in utero, by the correct sound frequency? Et cetera.

Geriaev has not yet been able to cure diabetes with this method, but, since I don't read Russian, the language in which he publishes, I am reliant on English translations and interpretations of what he or others make public about his work. In any case, Geriaev has given talks and interviews discussing the implications of Wave Genetics, among them the ability to regenerate organs, repair congenital anomalies, and extend human longevity.

The growing field of biofield science is far too expansive to explore here, but there are increasingly more promising publications coming out of the discipline every day. The science is gaining respect and, more importantly for futurist writers, the possibilities for storytelling are beyond exciting. From my perspective, most of that excitement comes from the potential of positing futures that merge old and new healing practices, simultaneously engendering more respect for cultural wellness traditions that have

generally not been taken seriously by the world of science.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Based in peri-apocalyptic Toronto, Zainab Amadahy is an author, screenwriter, professional development consultant, researcher and educator. She has authored novels and creative non-fiction books as well as a screenplay in postproduction. Zainab's background in medical and photovoltaic technologies as well as community service in the areas of Indigenous knowledge reclamation, *curanderismo,* non-profit housing, women's services, migrant settlement and community arts inform her work. Links to Zainab's articles, essays and other literary work can be found on her website: www.swallowsongs.com.

Interview: Daniel H. Wilson

Grace L. Dillon

Daniel H. Wilson (Cherokee) is the author of the New York Times bestselling *Robopocalypse* and its sequel *Robogenesis,* as well as seven other books, including *How to Survive a Robot Uprising, A Boy and His Bot,* and *Amped.* He earned a Ph.D. in Robotics from Carnegie Mellon University, as well as master's degrees in Artificial Intelligence and Robotics. His graphic novel *Quarantine Zone* was released in March 2016. Wilson lives in Portland, Oregon, where nonfiction guest editor Grace L. Dillon tracked him down to talk science fiction and *destruction.*

This issue of *Lightspeed* is devoted to People of Colo(u)r (POC) who "destroy" science fiction. I thought of you right away. Robots could pretty much destroy anything. But does the spirit of that resonate with you at all: you're a Native SF writer who is succeeding beyond most emerging writers' dreams, with multiple book deals and movie deals on top of them. Would you say that Native or other POC writers *must destroy* SF in order to gain relevance in the mainstream?

Absolutely. I think progress needs destruction followed by rebuilding. As new voices show up with new points of view, some of the old tropes and assumptions will be destroyed or combined with something different. Science fiction should represent the hopes and fears of society—and that means everyone. So when a new writer arrives with a unique point of view, they are both destroying SF and rebuilding it into something better and more representative.

Your graphic novel series *Earth 2* extended the exploration of interactions among technology, power, self-determination, and race that you dealt with so insightfully in *Amped.* You deal with cutting-edge themes, so what is the inspiration? What got you started writing SF?

Like most of us, the love of reading set me on a path to writing. I began writing science fiction short stories in high school, when I was also learning to program computers. The stories were terrible. My English teacher would edit them for me, staying very positive. But the pulp magazines always sent back thin envelopes with form letter rejections. I couldn't stop trying, though. I thought of short stories as not so different from programming computers. The human reader is the compiler, the story is the code, and when you put the two together something really magical happens. Put these symbols in this order and a person bursts into tears. A different order and the hair on their arms stands up.

I always wanted to master that magic trick, and I'm still trying.

What/who were your major influences?

I read everything that I could get my hands on, good and bad. I loved a lot of authors and I could list their names here but really, my biggest influences were the great teachers I had. My first grade teacher gave me a love of reading that I never lost. My fourth grade teacher rewarded me for being smart in an environment where being smart was not cool (and it helped that he was a trophy maker in his spare time!). In high school, my computer science and English teachers encouraged me and put up with all my teenaged angst. I was even lucky in college and graduate school to have great mentors who introduced me to artificial intelligence and empowered me to become the top expert in the world on my little corner of academia.

Were there any connections between SF characters or themes and your personal experience as a Native person (or POC) that served to lure you into the web of SF over other genres?

I am a Cherokee citizen, and I grew up in northeastern Oklahoma around lots of Indian people (just like everybody in Oklahoma does). But that said, I didn't have a serious traditional upbringing and I'm not anywhere near being full-blooded. I tend to think of my ethnic origins as independent of my love for SF and science—jarringly so, I suppose, if you consider the fiction I write. I mean, *Robopocalypse* is a story about Indians fighting killer robots. You should write about what you love and what you know, and those two topics are the things I know and love. Every writer is like a unique flavor of ice cream, and my combination is advanced technology and people from the Great Plains of Oklahoma. Hah!

The Indigenous Studies scholar Jace Weaver (Cherokee) has spoken of "communitism," meaning "communities that collectively serve as social activists." *Amped, Robopocalypse,* and *Robogenesis* all seem to include an emphasis on community. How important is this theme to you?

I have a fairly humanist viewpoint, in that if people aren't affected by something then I don't attach much importance to it. (If a tree falls in the woods and nobody is around to dramatically dive out of the way, who cares?) That viewpoint extends to the possibilities of technology and to SF levels of technological progress. I am most interested in how technology will affect people, and communities of people. Our great human power is the ability to build civilization—to work together to be more than the sum of our parts. These

civilizations—these cultures—are what carry us through rough times. In *Robopocalypse* and *Robogenesis,* I focus on the Osage people and how their culture reacts to an apocalypse, with inclusion of all survivors (i.e., respect for life), practicality over idealism, and humor in the face of horror.

Chief Gray of the Osage Nation said, "Today, our neighbors are beginning to understand that when tribes are strong, everyone benefits. A rising tide lifts all boats. This has been done, not on the white man's terms, but on our own. It's not revenge, it's rebirth, and as our elders say, it is good." This positive message is at the heart of the movement I've called Indigenous Futurisms. I notice that despite the "apocalyptic" context of *Amped, Robopocalypse,* and *Robogenesis,* you always maintain a positive, hopeful message. Would you agree? Is this an important philosophical stance, and/or in any way motivated by Indigenous ways of thinking?

Human beings always find a way to overcome—and the proof of that is our existence. Growing up in Oklahoma, I was lucky to see how Native Americans and their sovereign nations have grown into the fabric of the United States of America. My home was simultaneously in the USA and the Cherokee Nation—the maps are literally overlaid on top of each other. I agree with Chief Gray that it's a good thing. What puts me most in awe of our species is our ability to adapt—socially, culturally, and technologically. From that vantage point, my attitude is optimistic—I think people are more good than bad. It's only natural to use an apocalyptic event to spark solidarity among humankind in fiction, because it so often happens (and has happened) in real life. If it hadn't, we wouldn't be here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) is a Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program, School of Gender, Race, and Nations, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, Indigenous Futurisms, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (Oregon State University Press, 2003). Her work appears in diverse journals including *The Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television; Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction; Extrapolation; The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts; The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television; Science Fiction Studies; Parabola;* and *Renaissance Papers.*

Book Reviews: June 2016

Sunil Patel | 2,100 words

Last Call at the Nightshade Lounge
Paul Krueger
Paperback/Ebook
ISBN 978-1594747595
Quirk Books, June 2016
288 pages

With *Last Call at the Nightshade Lounge,* Paul Krueger bursts onto the urban fantasy scene with a premise so amazing it's a wonder no one's done it before: *superhero bartenders powered by magical cocktails.*

Bailey Chen discovers the world of superhero bartenders powered by magical cocktails as protagonists often do: by accident. While being the smartest barback at the Nightshade Lounge, she makes herself a perfectly proportioned screwdriver, downs it, and gets superstrength. Which comes in handy when she encounters a soul-sucking skinless demon. So it turns out that when her coworkers are taking "smoke breaks," they're actually taking "save-the-world breaks." But does Bailey want to be a world-saving bartender, or does she want to make her parents proud with a "real job" that involves lots and lots of spreadsheets?

In typical origin-story fashion, Bailey gets told the rules of the world by various people, she finds a mentor, she trains to use her powers, and so on. It's not until the halfway point that the major conflict of the book emerges, but I didn't mind because Bailey was so likable and had such relatable twentysomething issues as "I haven't seen my best friend from high school since graduation and now I think I'm into him??" and "I am still living with my parents and I don't want to see them make out." Plus, Krueger deftly sprinkles plot points throughout so when the book shifts from "Introduce the world" to "Solve a problem," it's clear the problem has been there all along. He supplements the narrative with real cocktail recipes and fictional cocktail lore, creating a whole alternate history with events like the Great Hangover and the Blackout. I love how much thought Krueger has put into this magic system—different alcohols and mixers are associated with specific powers—but I admit that I found it hard to take seriously at times. The premise is just *so absurd*—and Krueger, naturally, can't resist wonderful puns like calling a group of soul-sucking demons a delirium of tremens—that the small moments of self-awareness aren't enough to completely smooth out the tonal imbalance.

Honestly, though, that's a flaw I can live with, because this book is *fun,* and we need more like it. Bailey's personal conflicts hit home, and the danger to Chicago feels real enough, but overall it's a light, enjoyable read with positive LGBT representation and the most action-packed Dumpster scene in all of literature. It's got superpowered bartenders

hurling lightning and flame! Why isn't this happening in every book? So when Paul Krueger hands you a Collins glass of magical mixology, diverse characters, and tight plotting, do not throw away your shot.

United States of Japan
Peter Tieryas
Paperback/Ebook
ISBN 978-0857665348
Angry Robot, March 2016
400 pages

Hailed as the spiritual successor to *The Man in the High Castle, United States of Japan* imagines an alternate history where Japan won World War II and the Japanese Empire rules America. The Los Angeles of 1988 is practically unrecognizable, not to mention far more technologically advanced than even the near future—it's got everything from portable death rays to genetically modified killer Pomeranians—but there are people who believe in America as we know it, the country that was and the country it would have become. A rebel group known as the George Washingtons has released a video game called *United States of America* that shows World War II as if America won—an alternate reality to them, the actual reality to us. This is the revisionist history within the revisionist history.

Chinese-Japanese video game censor Beniko Ishimura and French-Korean Tokko agent Akiko Tsukino—neither one full-blooded Japanese yet both fiercely loyal to the Emperor—have a common goal: find out who's behind this seditious video game and shut it down. Ben is compelling because of his past, and Akiko is compelling because she will literally kill anyone at any moment probably. Theirs is not a simple task, as an investigation into one suicide leads them into danger upon danger . . . and forces them to question their own loyalties.

Anyone lured by the enticing cover will be disappointed in the overall lack of *Pacific Rim*-style mecha action. It's not until halfway through the book that you get to see a giant robot throw a tank at some other tanks, then slice a tank up with a sword, and it's awesome, but this book is not about mechas. It is about empires. The horrible folly of empires and what unquestioning loyalty does to society and individuals. Peter Tieryas criticizes the Japanese Empire relentlessly, and even though the George Washingtons cling to the American Dream, it's not immune to criticism either. This is a brutal book that pulls no punches, that compares humans and their religions to bacteriophages, that makes you rethink everything because this *book* is revisionist history; it is a virus that infects your mind with a new reality in which the truth is what the government says it is and if you disagree, here's a knife with which to commit ritual suicide.

Though my familiarity with Japanese culture comes mainly from their media, I appreciated how much that culture seeps into the book. A green-haired man with

heightened emotions feels like he stepped out of an anime; the offbeat style of metaphor reminded me of light novels. Yet I was constantly thrown out by Tieryas's insistence on awkwardly defining every Japanese word in the text rather than providing a glossary at the end; many are also defined by context or could have been. In an otherwise immersive book with a richly crafted world, it hinders the reading experience.

United States of Japan takes some time to get going, but once it does, it's a hell of a ride, with multiple POVs and plot twists as history is written and rewritten right in front of you. It's a challenging book with an ending as powerful as the iron grip of the godlike Emperor.

Infomocracy
Malka Older
Hardcover/Ebook
ISBN 978-0765385154
Tor.com, June 2016
384 pages

In an election year where we Americans are pondering the strange, outdated mechanics of our own government—what's the deal with *superdelegates??*—Malka Older posits a whole new model of governance in *Infomocracy,* which may be the most important book of the year.

Imagine a world where "countries" no longer exist. Instead, the world is divided into micro-democracies called centenals, geographic locations containing one hundred thousand people, each one governed by a separate body such that you could drive through Jakarta and pass through several centenals, the laws changing wildly as you cross the borders. Predictably, some of these governments are corporations like Philip Morris, but some have the citizens' best interest in mind like Policy1st. (Obviously branding is key.) Every ten years, the world holds an election that determines which of these many governments holds a Supermajority. Heritage has been effectively ruling the world for twenty years, and it's election time. But wait, there's more: Information, a separate, unregulated entity, controls all the world's, well, information, as if Google got too big for its britches and now manages all your personal data and runs the election.

. . . What could possibly go wrong?

Ken, an up-and-comer at Policy1st; Mishima, an Information operative; and Domaine, an anti-democratic civilian, are about to find out. And in Domaine's case, likely have a hand in it.

Infomocracy is a political thriller that is really, truly about politics. The nitty-gritty of politics: campaigning, debates, voting, etc. It's about how the sausage gets made, not the actual sausage. This is a book for the politics geeks who obsessively refresh FiveThirtyEight.com. Admittedly, I am not one of those people (everything I know about politics I learned from *The West Wing),* and as a result, I had a difficult time following

the book. Older thrusts the reader into her world and rarely, if ever, slows down to explain it; it took me nearly eighty pages to get a handle on who was working with whom and why, and that was because of a debate in which participants gave thirty-three answers simultaneously and I could see whose "side" people were on. Even when the main event —the election—kicked into gear, I found myself lost, and yet I could not stop reading because of the incredible energy behind every word. I waited for the next laugh-out-loud line about elephant coitus, the next wry character observation, the next surprising development that I might not understand the specifics of but that I knew would make things more complicated.

Infomocracy has the slick language of *Snow Crash,* the complex global politics of *Persona,* and the chaotic storytelling of *Moxyland.* It's bold as hell and never boring, practically dizzying. Yet at its core it asks the reader to think about the very nature of government, who we put in charge, and what they will do to seize and/or maintain their power over us.

The Star-Touched Queen
Roshani Chokshi
Hardcover/Ebook
ISBN 978-1250085474
St. Martin's Griffin, April 2016
352 pages

In the kingdom of Bharata, Mayavati is the most notorious of the Raja's many daughters, for her horoscope portends a marriage that partners her with death. This fate follows her wherever she goes, from the harem wives in the hallways to the potential suitors from other kingdoms. But when the day finally comes to choose her husband, a mysterious hooded man named Amar whisks her away to the Otherworldly kingdom of Akaran to be his bride—his *queen.*

At times *The Star-Touched Queen* was so gorgeously written I wanted to die. Every few pages, I would hit a line like "I wanted a love thick with time, as inscrutable as if a lathe had carved it from night and as familiar as the marrow in my bones." The last time I felt like this about language in a book, it was Sofia Samatar's *A Stranger in Olondria.* While this book isn't quite as dense with poetry, Roshani Chokshi's words dance lightly on the page, and with each twirl of a sari, the world comes to life in your eyes and in your heart.

As a fellow person of Indian descent, I delighted in the many ways Chokshi incorporated Indian culture and mythology into the story. It was like reading Jhumpa Lahiri, but now with magic! This is a book with phrases like "sweet as rasmalai," where the main character wears a sari and rides a saddled water buffalo. You don't understand how excited I was to see someone ride a water buffalo in a book; *I love water buffaloes.* My reaction highlights how important it is for people of color to be allowed to tell their

own stories: They know what resonates. One chapter title references a story I loved in childhood, and seeing it used in a book as part of character development and knowing that the author also grew up with that same story means more to me than I can express.

I was reminded of Cindy Pon's *Serpentine* in the way both books use mythology to tell a teenage girl's coming-of-age story; Skybright and Maya discover they are more than who they thought they were, who they were *told* they were. As Maya explores the realm of Akaran, she searches for clues about the identity of her new husband, who seems to treat her as familiar. Is this her fate? To be a queen? How does a girl controlled by fate control the fate of others? How can she control her *own* fate?

The Star-Touched Queen bursts with magic and wonder, bolstered by evocative language. Halfway through the book, Chokshi rolls up her sleeves and lets all hell break loose, and the magic and wonder give way to a somewhat darker tone. While I had been enraptured before, I lost my footing a bit because although I appreciated the plotting, the vibe had changed so dramatically that I felt like I was in a different story. The transition is smoothed, however, by the presence of a flesh-eating demon horse who now challenges Kamala Khan for title of Favorite Kamala. Maya's magical adventure comes to an end on a strong note, as we see how this remarkable journey has changed her from the princess we meet in the beginning into the queen of the title. And we've been changed too, because this is a world I won't soon forget.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sunil Patel is a Bay Area fiction writer and playwright who has written about everything from ghostly cows to talking beer. His plays have been performed at San Francisco Theater Pub and San Francisco Olympians Festival, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fireside Magazine, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Flash Fiction Online, The Book Smugglers, Fantastic Stories of the Imagination,* and *Asimov's Science Fiction,* among others. Plus he reviews books for *Lightspeed* and is Assistant Editor of *Mothership Zeta*. His favorite things to consume include nachos, milkshakes, and narrative. Find out more at ghostwritingcow.com, where you can watch his plays, or follow him @ghostwritingcow. His Twitter has been described as "engaging," "exclamatory," and "crispy, crunchy, peanut buttery."

Artists Gallery

Alan Bao, Odera Igbokwe, Sonia Liao, Christopher Park, Pugletto, Tanna Tucker, Melanie Ujimori, Victoria Ying



"The Tempting Tree" by Sonia Liao



"Twisted Mind" by Sonia Liao



"The Tempest" by Christopher Park



"Information Overload" by Christopher Park



"Seasons" by Melanie Ujimori



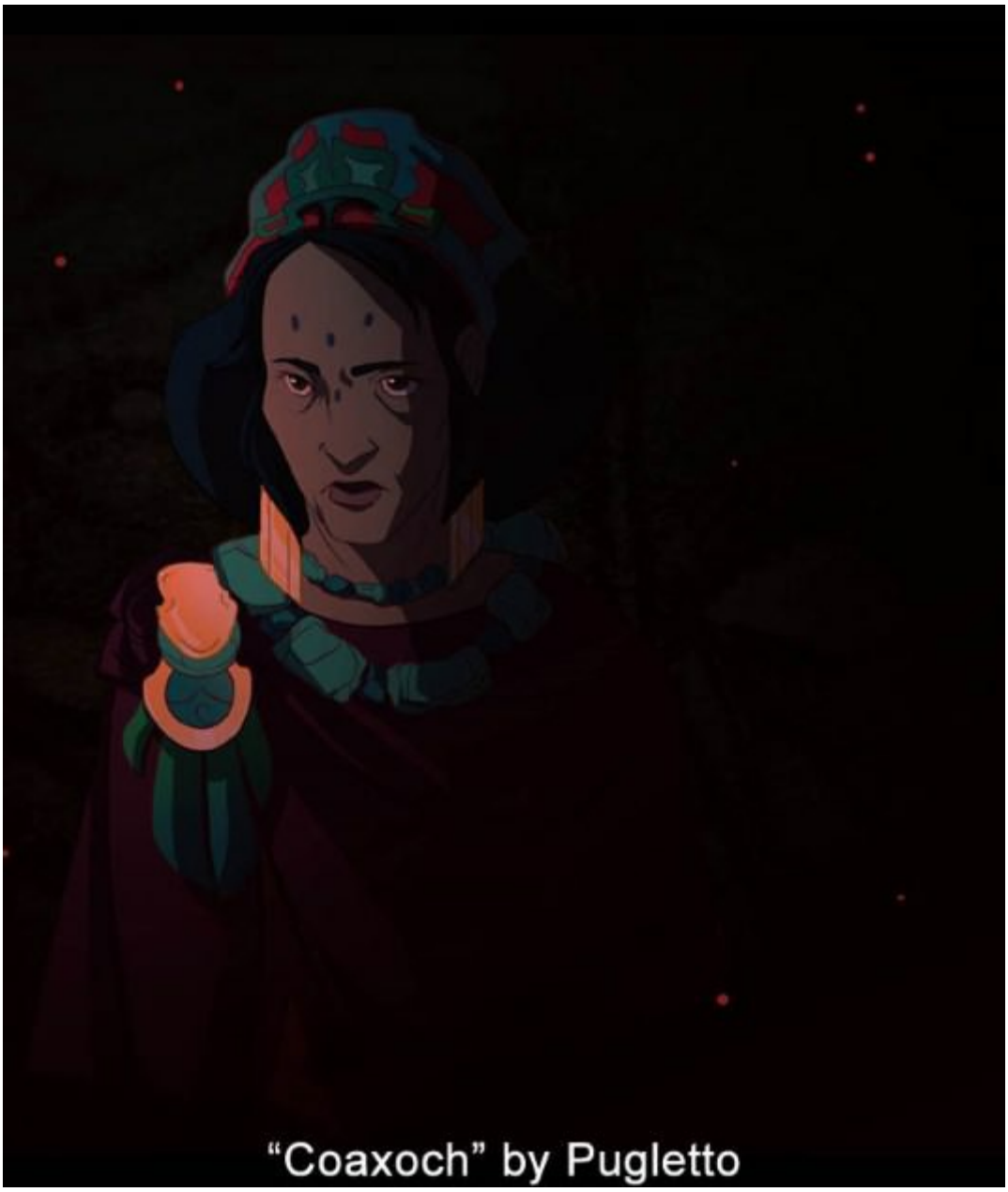
"Rising Dragon" by Melanie Ujimori



"East Vs. West" by Alan Bao



"The Fisherman and His Boy" by Alan Bao



“Coaxoch” by Pugletto



"Fennec Night" by Pugletto



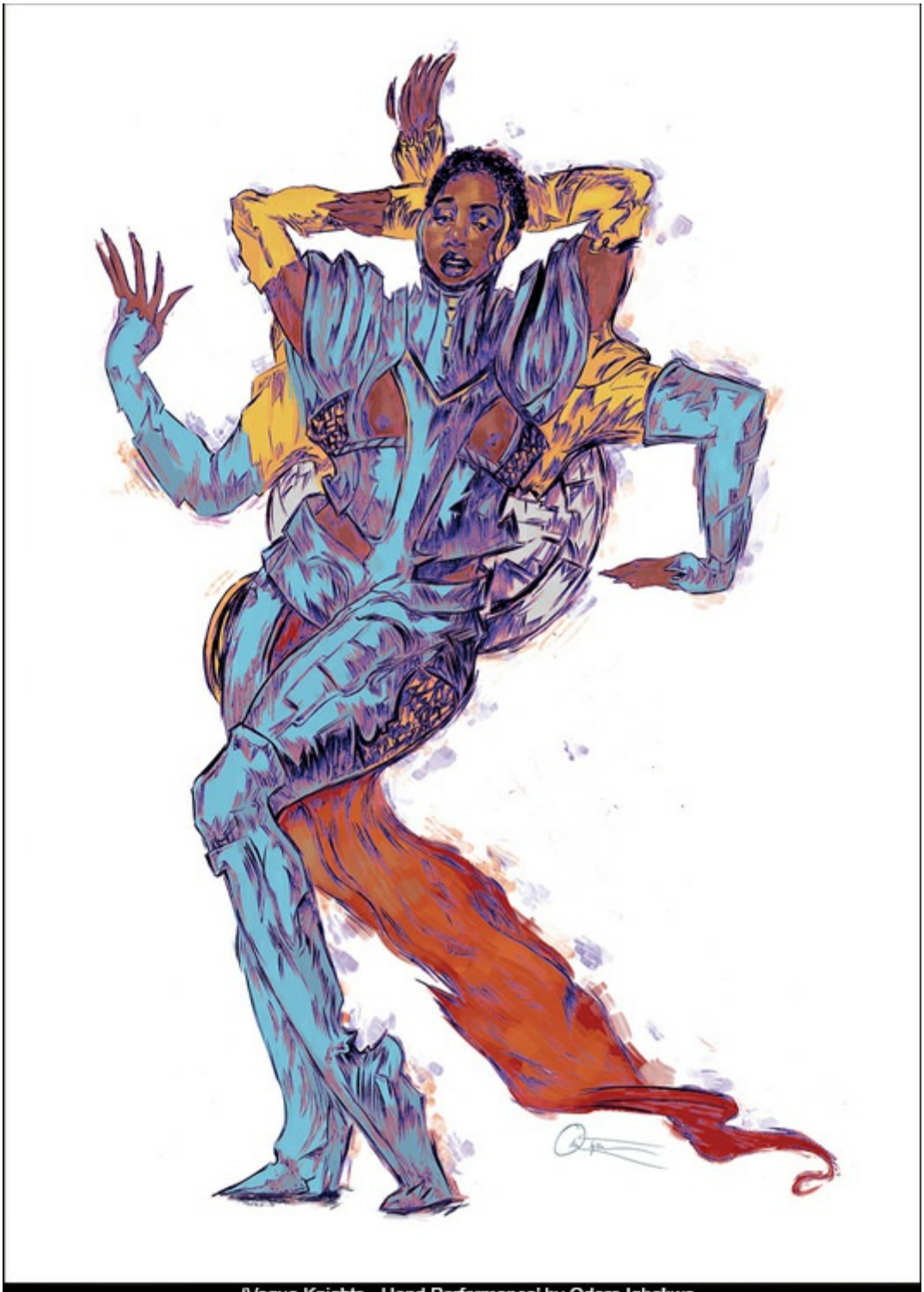
"Sea Wulfe" by Tanna Tucker



"Blood Sisters" by Tanna Tucker



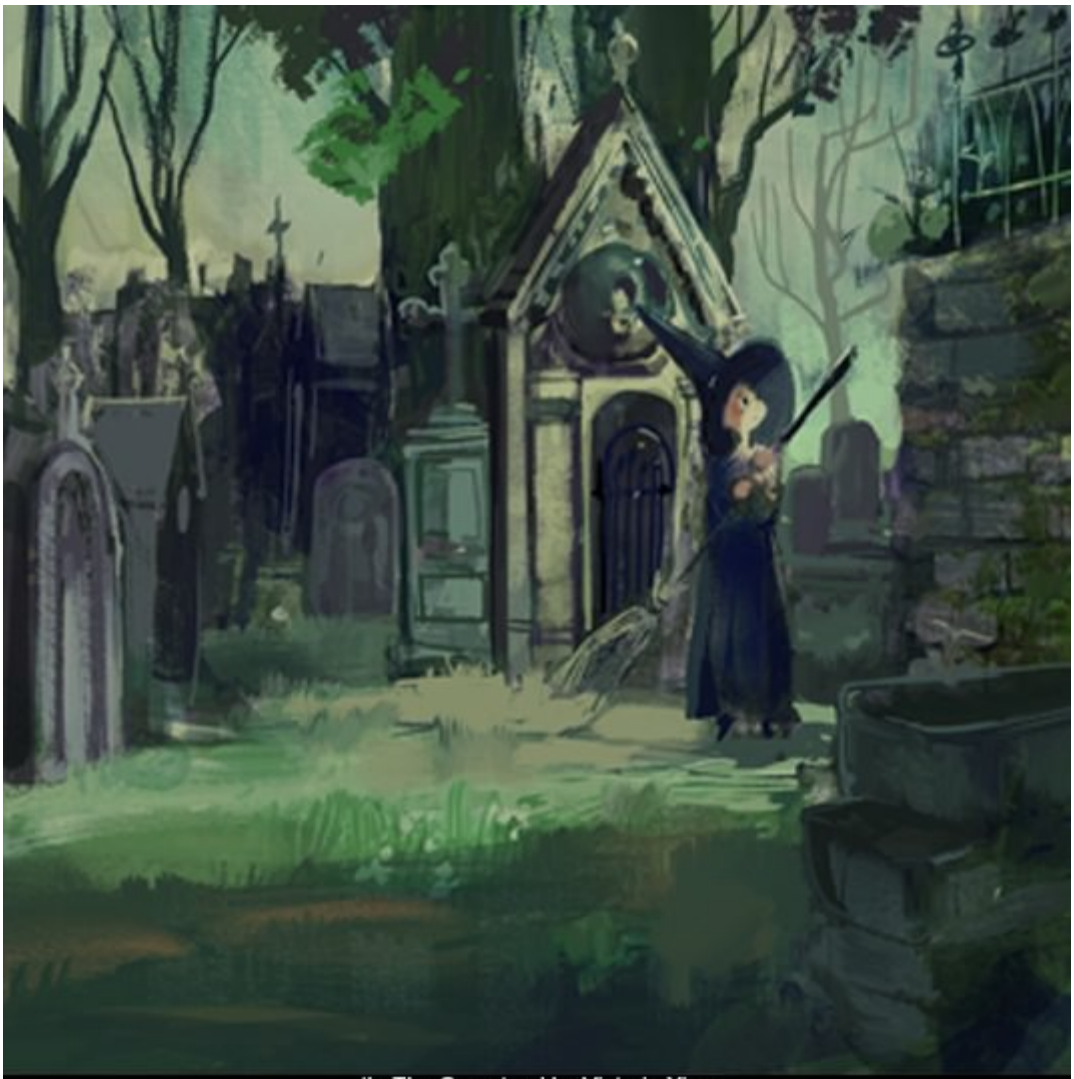
'Obatala - Dance of the Summoner II' by Odera Igbokwe



'Vogue Knights - Hand Performance' by Odera Igbokwe



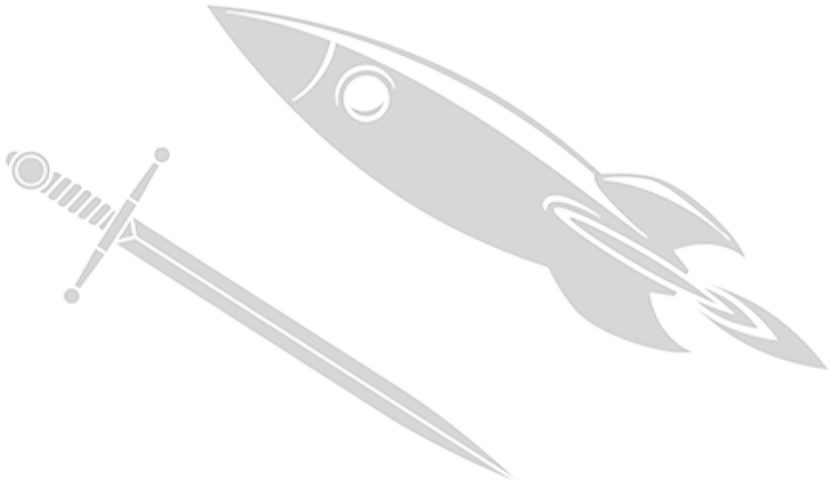
'Hygrangeas' by Victoria Ying



'In The Cemetery' by Victoria Ying

PERSONAL ESSAYS

EDITED BY SUNIL PATEL



Buzzword

Alyssa Wong | 910 words

i.

Here's how you learn that there are people you've never met who hate you.

You are in your early twenties, small of frame and confidence, and you have just been nominated for a Nebula Award. Your world explodes; fans email you to tell you that they've read your story, your Twitter follower count ticks rapidly upward. People start wanting things from you, and it's both flattering and disconcerting.

Shortly afterwards, you're in New York, visiting friends, dodging snowstorms. Someone forwards you a link to the comments on a blog. "Just look," they write. And when you do, you find that someone's written pages upon pages about you. There's a brief mention of your story, but you're the main target, and the accusations are ugly.

You don't sleep well that night. The air mattress deflates and you wake on the cold, hard floor, thinking, *Who the hell's been watching me?*

You think about going dark, locking your social media account. But your career is just starting, and if you lock down your social media, will that hurt it? Will that help? Is a career in SFF short fiction even worth knowing that someone is watching your every step?

It takes a drunken, dramatic reading of the post with one of your best friends and a night out on the town to begin getting over it. What bothers you most is that you can't figure out where the venom is coming from. "I'm not even a person," you blurt out to your friend.

She looks at you sharply, eyes glittering under the Manhattan streetlights. "Yes, you are," she says. "You're very much a person. Don't ever forget that."

ii.

The truth is, you're used to people seeing you as a category instead of an individual. You're the Asian girl, the Chinese one, sometimes the Filipina, but mostly just the Asian girl. You're used to getting stared at in restaurants or mistaken for one of the two adopted Korean girls in town, even by people who've known them their whole lives.

It's a weird, hypervisible sort of invisibility. You give up on being a person, because no one will remember which one of the Asians you are anyway.

You discover this is a problem in SFF, too, even with award-winning authors. You wonder when it will be your turn.

iii.

The 2015 Hugos happen. Cixin Liu wins Best Novel for *The Three-Body Problem.* He is the first Chinese author to win a Hugo Award for Best Novel, and watching Ken Liu, his translator, accept the award sparks something bright and burning in you. It reminds you of the time in college when your friend pushed a copy of Ted Chiang's "Hell is the Absence of God" into your hands, the intense, excited look on his face, the way he said, "This means we can do it, too," and how, for the first time, you really believed it.

The 2015 Hugos happen, and the internet explodes with commentary and slurs. One white editor refers to Cixin Liu as a chicom; another writer calls him a chinaman. To them, he's not a person, just a racist caricature. It is two-thousand-fucking-fifteen, and your blood boils, and when you speak up, the trolls descend. *It's not really a slur. It's an old military term, how could it be offensive? What do you know, anyway?* The digs are personal, and they get more and more personal with every attack.

You think of the cold, distant tone of your father's voice when he says, "Chicom? Oh yes, I remember that word very well." You think of your college friend, who spun fury and hurt into fire and art.

You install mass-blockers on social media, you bunker down, you lean on your friends, you channel the pain, and you write.

iv.

There are a lot of posts like that first one. Quotes pulled from social media, context be damned. All kinds of identities theorized and insisted upon. Your favorite is that you're a gay, cosplaying Vietnamese woman who hates white people and wants to destroy the Constitution. The constant subtext: *You aren't even American; what are you doing in American SFF?*

The more you read, the more you realize the truth. These posts were never about you as a writer, or even as a person. They're about what you represent. They're about white supremacy and yellow peril, a majority's fear of growing irrelevant and being displaced. It's about hating you for taking up space they believe they deserve.

You talk to older POC about how to deal with harassment. They tell you that you have two options: You can be quiet and hope that it stops, which won't work, or you can expose their ugliness for everyone to see.

People will write about you. Your very existence in this space is a political act. Some people will accuse you of corrupting their genre with political agendas, for daring to write about race and gender and all of the things that you are. People will make up ugly-sounding acronyms to describe you; others will go straight for the racist slang you've heard your whole life. But you are a survivor, and you'll never get less brown or yellow, no matter how little you speak, and they'll never stop hating you for it, so you might as well speak your goddamn mind.

And every day, you make a choice, and you think, "I am a person," and you press *post*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alyssa Wong is a Nebula-, Shirley Jackson-, and World Fantasy Award-nominated author, shark aficionado, and 2013 graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her work has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Strange Horizons, Tor.com, Uncanny Magazine, Lightspeed Magazine, Nightmare Magazine,* and *Black Static,* among others. She is an MFA candidate at North Carolina State University and a member of the Manhattan-based writing group Altered Fluid, and can be found on Twitter @crashwong.

Pushing Back Against the Wall

Aliette de Bodard | 780 words

Some days, I despair.

I get up in the morning, and the same things keep happening with clockwork regularity. I see people who don't understand how hurtful it is for minorities that writers take viscerally painful subjects and mine them for shiny elements that can be put into a story—how gut-wrenching it is when someone takes your wars and your oppression and makes them into bowdlerised theme parks that readers can dip into for a moment's entertainment—when this watering-down becomes a lauded, awards-garlanded reference, and everything else is inauthentic, or unnecessarily grim, or too political by comparison to it. I see people who don't understand that to write a culture not your own is *hard* work, who don't see that mindsets and values are different across the world, and that not everyone shares the dominant USian, majority white, and individualistic culture that has now become a hegemony strangling everything else.

I am told that I am being silly for protesting—too sensitive, too prescriptive—or, worse, that I'm failing to be supportive enough of diversity. That I should be happy with what I have, with the crumbs of representation that are being thrown my way. With the Vietnamese forever stuck in the Vietnamese/American war, forever in the background of narratives about Westerners. I am told that there are large swathes of things that exist, invisibly, outside the hegemony—as if oppression was always about outright and brutal suppression, as if being invisible and unrecognised wasn't its own issue. I am told I shouldn't speak of this, because it makes me angry and unpleasant and unattractive, and is that what I really want to be, as an author?

But I have to speak up, lest I choke.

It took me *years* to understand that the things I had absorbed from my readings—the plots where family was a hindrance and a stricture, where ancestor worship and spirituality were a quaint/harmful/irrational custom; where the closest people to me were the aliens, those odd and weird cultures presented as exotic counterpoints to the solidity and rationality of Western culture in space—all those things were not *givens*. That writing science fiction and fantasy didn't have to involve them, and that I could write my own stuff and that I would still get to use spaceships and artificial intelligences and all the things that I love. That the wall of "this isn't right, this isn't proper" wasn't something I needed to be bound by.

And, sometimes, I still wonder if I'm doing the right thing. Sometimes I worry I'm not writing True Science Fiction (or True Fantasy). Some days I hit that wall really hard, and I have to tell myself that I don't believe that stuff anymore. That all the things in my brain, all the little voices whispering that I'm Doing It Wrong, this is just how hegemonies work: by continuous reinforcement; by convincing people that there is only one true way (or a handful of such); by promoting and valuing, over and over, the same narratives

without thought to how harmful they can be.

And some days I get up in the morning and I realise: There are more and more marginalised people in the field, year after year, and we're speaking up. We're sharing our experiences and our points of view. We're writing our own stories and putting them out there, and the field is expanding ever outwards, to be more and more inclusive. And we're more and more supported, more and more listened to, more and more *recognised*. And narratives are changing, too. There is a growing awareness of pitfalls, exoticising, and the difficulty of writing other cultures; a greater thoughtfulness in what is put out there. And this in turn is slowly but surely making its way into the collective psyche. The field as it was in 2006, when I first entered it, is very different from the one now, at the close of 2015.

Some days I realise: We're pushing back against the wall, inch by painful inch. And yeah, some days it doesn't feel like it's moving at all. Some days I remember that books by POCs and other marginalised people still sell fewer copies than dominant narratives, and that they're held to more exacting standards. Some days it doesn't feel like the message is getting through. But it is. Little by little, we're moving that wall. Little by little, we're making a difference. We're changing the world—for us, for the ones that will come after us.

And you know what? Some days, I despair. But most days, I get up, and do the work that needs to be done.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a day job as a System Engineer. She is the author of the critically acclaimed Obsidian and Blood trilogy of Aztec noir fantasies, as well as numerous short stories. Recent works include *The House of Shattered Wings* (Roc/Gollancz), a novel set in a turn-of-the-century Paris devastated by a magical war, and "The Citadel of Weeping Pearls" *(Asimov's* Oct/Nov 2015), a novella set in the same universe as her Vietnamese space opera *On a Red Station Drifting*.

I'm a Big Black Man Who Writes Science Fiction

Malon Edwards | 570 words

I'm a big guy. I'm six feet two inches tall. I'm two hundred thirty pounds. And I'm black.

I'm a big black guy.

That's an uncomfortable image for many people. Mostly white people. But it's a nearly non-existent image when it comes to science fiction writers.

Big black guys are supposed to be athletes.

In 1998, I served as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Billings, Montana, where I worked in an elementary school with at-risk students for a year. My first day, I walked into the cafeteria during lunch time and some kid said (a little too loudly), "Wow, Michael Jordan!"

Makes sense. There weren't too many big black guys in Billings, and the only one he'd ever seen (and remembered) was the greatest basketball player of all time.

Or, big black guys are supposed to be authority figures.

My second year as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Missoula, Montana, I worked at a high school, also with at-risk students. I recruited freshmen to participate in enrichment programs, which meant pulling them out of class. Word got around. One day, an upperclassman asked me if I was a truant officer. Makes sense. The only reason a non-teacher big black guy would pull some of the most troubled (and troublesome) students out of class was to discuss truancy issues.

But big black guys aren't supposed to be science fiction writers.

Makes sense. I didn't know any growing up on the South Side of Chicago. But I knew my sister.

My older sister introduced me to science fiction. I was four-and-a-half years old. She was fifteen.

She was a huge *Star Wars* fan. She'd seen it at the drive-in, where she held a tape recorder to the speaker hanging from the car window so she could listen to her favorite parts at home whenever she wanted. She'd also had so many *Star Wars* toys in her room that going in there was like Christmas morning to four-year-old me.

She had a twelve-inch-tall Darth Vader (cape included). I broke that. She had Luke's land speeder. I broke that. She even had a three-and-three-fourths-inch-tall Lando Calrissian (cape also included). I broke that, too.

I broke everything I could get my hands on.

So she banished me from her room for the next three years. Banishment ended when she went away to college, which meant I could play with all of the toys I didn't break. But there were no toys. She'd taken them all with her.

There were books, though.

I don't remember the first book I grabbed. Probably *Dune.* The Bene Gesserit fascinated me. I—now a little eight-year-old black boy on the South Side of Chicago—

wanted to be one of them. When my sister came home from college, I told her. We talked science fiction for days. Even today, we still do.

Back then, my sister wrote short stories and plays, so she encouraged me to write. My first science fiction story was about two astronauts who take a rocket ship to the Moon. One decides to stay, all alone. The other goes back to Earth.

Not all big black guys are athletes. Or authority figures. Or even criminals.

Some of us, like me, are science fiction writers. For many, that's an uncomfortable image.

And yet, we big black guys write on.

Because that is what we do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malon Edwards was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, but now lives in the Greater Toronto Area, where he was lured by his beautiful Canadian wife. Many of his short stories are set in an alternate Chicago and feature people of color. Currently, he serves as Managing Director and Grants Administrator for the Speculative Literature Foundation, which provides a number of grants for writers of speculative literature.

Spoiler Alert: The Future? Yeah, I'm in It

Yash Kesanakurthy | 550 words

My relationship with science fiction is uncomfortable and complicated. I did not grow up with *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. None of my school libraries had any Douglas Adams; I did not even know Octavia Butler was an option. Most of my childhood in Saudi Arabia was a blur of Disney movies and Enid Blyton's syrupy, well-mannered mysteries. It was when I moved back to India that I got my first small taste of SF (liberally blended with fantasy). My bookstore mostly housed bestsellers, so *Artemis Fowl* became my long-time school bus companion. When I moved to Canada, I quickly fell in love with *Doctor Who* and then just as quickly fell out of love. I read the requisite SF/dystopian novels that made it into my lit courses and sometimes I watched them; rarely with lasting affection, though. It was when I started my MA in Children's Lit that Artemis's final story was released. I devoured it with great reverence and nostalgia. For a while, this seemed . . . enough.

Thing is, when you've moved around as much as I have, when you're as scared of not fitting in as I am, or as scared of embarrassment, you internalize all the nonsense that the loudest voices are spewing. You change your accent to make it more neutral (palatable). You laugh at jokes (slights) that make you uncomfortable. You push the clothes you love to the back of the closet in order to fit in (and hide). You tend not to understand why Holly's skin was "coffee-coloured" but Artemis's pasty white ass was never described as "marzipan-coloured." I existed in a present I did not really feel a part of. I read about a past that was equally shut off to me and people like me. Not once did it occur to me that I could look in a book about the future and see me. Not once did it occur to me that I could look in a book and see myself surviving, enduring, living—because what is the future if not those things?

Science fiction is often futuristic but, to me, it's kind of the opposite. To me, it's about addressing the past. It is about looking at the present and thinking, "How did it come to this?" It is about looking at the page and thinking, "Where will it go from here?" You can tell when writers have ignored those questions. They tend to write the kind of future that makes my relationship with SF so complicated. Complicated because it was science fiction that got me believing in a future void of people like me, in the temporary nature of POC, in their disposability. Complicated because it was also science fiction that got me into the habit of hoping (and later, demanding) that the future change. Reading Marissa Meyer's The Lunar Chronicles—which not only has a diverse cast of characters but starts its story in Beijing instead of a whitewashed New York—was the first time I felt comfortable reading science fiction. It made me read more, want more, and it led me to Marie Lu's equally diverse Legend trilogy. Lu's world is what finally got me to put words to my discomfort: A future without me isn't fiction. It's a lie. And it is no longer acceptable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yash Kesanakurthy has never stayed in one place for too long and it is a matter of some astonishment to her that this is her eighth year residing in Vancouver, Canada. She graduated from the University of British Columbia with a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies (English Lit, Asian Lit, and Women's Studies) and an MA in Children's Literature. She is the co-founder of a children's lit blog called *The Book Wars* and is a regular writer for Book Riot. Yash is currently working on her own YA SF/F contribution as well as an all-ages picture book.

I Have a Few Demands

Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali | 500 words

In the summer of 1977, my Aunt Gloria corralled all of the children in her care into her car and dropped us off at the movie theater. I didn't know what we were there to see. I was six years old and the only girl among three boys. Aunt Gloria instructed, "Sit your little behinds down and don't get up until the movie is over." Then she left. Today I am forty-five and I can still vividly recall what I saw once the lights went down.

Close your eyes as I tell you.

The background was the black curtain of space speckled with thousands of white stars in the distance. A series of bold yellow letters crawled up the screen and faded to nothing while a booming epic soundtrack played. I was mesmerized. Weren't you? What followed that introduction is still nothing less than spectacular and history-making.

But unlike my cousins, I didn't spend the next few years pretending to be Luke Skywalker while twirling a plastic toy lightsaber. Nor did I don earmuff hair buns and pretend to be Princess Leia. I loved *Star Wars,* but even then, I only felt like a spectator.

My love of science fiction developed much later. I was standing on the edge of a dark precipice in my life. I was depressed and felt as if I had forfeited my gifts and potential. I was momentarily stagnant. Science fiction, on the other hand, was changing, slowly and in miniscule increments, but changing nonetheless. People of color were playing roles beyond silent extras, subordinates, or the guy who dies in the first act.

Do you remember Guinan from *Star Trek: The Next Generation?* Regal, gorgeous, wise, incredibly strong, and black.

One day while watching *Star Trek* reruns, my daughter turned to me and said, "Mommy, you look just like her." What a compliment!

Science fiction has come to represent more to me than the idea that there are possibilities beyond our limited imaginings: It also taught me that people like me, people of color, can actually be a part of it. A real part.

People of color have been rallying more than ever for their rightful and realistic place in science fiction. Our detractors try to shut us down by telling us we're too sensitive, or that diversity doesn't matter. We all know this isn't true. They even tell us that if we want diverse science fiction so badly we should go and write it ourselves. To that, I say, I will. But is that enough?

No. Miniscule increments aren't enough. I demand more diversity in the genre I love most. I demand that more POC who write science fiction are given the opportunity to expose the wider world to their genius. I demand that science fiction incorporate more substantive characters of color. I demand these things because I don't want my children and future grandchildren to ever feel like mere spectators to the genre I have taught them to love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khaalidah Muhammad-Ali lives in Houston, Texas with her family. By day she works as a breast oncology nurse. At all other times she juggles, none too successfully, writing, reading, gaming, and gardening. She has a self-published novel entitled *An Unproductive Woman,* has stories published in or upcoming in *Escape Pod, An Alphabet of Embers* anthology, *STRAEON 3,* and *Diabolical Plots*. Khaalidah is also the Assistant Editor at *PodCastle*. She is on a mission to encourage more women to submit SFF stories. Of her alter ego, K from the planet Vega, it is rumored that she owns a time machine and knows the secret to immortality. You can catch her posts at her website, www.khaalidah.com, and you can follow her on Twitter, @khaalidah.

Thirsty for New

Malka Older | 510 words

I am a xenophile. I want to be able to eat a different kind of food every night of the week. I want my shuffle to jump from nineties indie to Malian-Cuban rhythms to Balkan beats.

It's largely because of this that I've spent most of my adult life living in countries that are not mine, learning languages that aren't mine. Yes, that's plural, because I wasn't content with one or two. My rule of thumb for when to move was when my fluency got good enough for me to make smartass remarks to people in authority, but the real reason was usually that I was thirsty for something new.

This wanderlust is more instinct than thought, but I've developed a philosophy to justify it. If I get farther away, if I find the way of life that is as different from mine as possible, maybe I'll be able to look back at myself from the outside.

Also, it's fun. Getting lost, having no idea what's going on, being amazed, experiencing what would be wild beyond belief at home. Learning on a curve like a baby's, a thousand new details every day until I do know what's going on and all the sensations start to dull again.

There may be a push factor besides the pull; or at least, it may make it easier that I never completely belonged at home. Representation matters, and my particular combination of attributes is pretty much unseen on screens, although I did find some reflections in books. Maybe it was easier to fudge the identification when the visuals were in my imagination.

Or maybe it was that with books you don't have to travel to leave this place where you don't belong.

With books you don't have to travel to find a place new and different enough to be able to see yourself from the outside.

With books you don't have to travel to get lost and experience something wild and gradually find your way in a new universe.

So I want as many different books as I can find. I want stories that come from places I've never been, that unravel in ways I don't expect. I want to be surprised by stories, which means that I don't know who the love interest is from page one and I don't want to recognize the shape of the narrative arc. Please, give me a narrative triangle instead, narrative pointillism.

I want to know how people whose lives are totally different from mine imagine the future, because I'm sure I've got some blind spots there. I want to know what those people think is going on in space.

Give me characters that represent me, when you can, but also give me characters that are completely, mind-openingly other. Other does not mean just those that are not me, but also those that are not the fingernail-thin sliver of humanity depicted in the vast majority

of mass culture.

Until the aliens bring us extraterrestrial stories, we need to make the most of the differences we have here.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malka Older is a writer, humanitarian aid worker, and Ph.D. candidate studying governance and disasters. Her novel *Infomocracy* will be published by Tor.com in 2016 and her writing can also be found at *Leveler, Bengal Lights, Tor.com, Sundog Lit,* and in the anthologies *Chasing Misery* and *My Cruel Invention*. Named Senior Fellow for Technology and Risk at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in 2015, she has more than eight years of experience in humanitarian aid and development, and has responded to disasters and complex emergencies in Sri Lanka, Uganda, Darfur, Indonesia, Japan, and Mali.

My Life as an Alien-American

Arthur Chu | 860 words

"Asians are aliens and aliens are Asians."

It wasn't a big presentation, even for a small liberal arts school like Swarthmore College. It was held in a classroom, not in one of the big lecture halls, attended mostly by professors who chuckled at the idea of studying racial tropes in pulpy space opera with barely contained derision. The presenter was a scruffy Chinese-American grad student who clearly got into this field of study by being an awkward nerd and whose awkward nerdiness torpedoed any gravitas his lecture might've had.

It was an unlikely setting for me to hear the words that would change my life.

"Asians are aliens and aliens are Asians," he said, and it was like I felt a light switch flipping on inside my brain, whole seemingly unrelated puzzle pieces from my life snapping neatly into one big picture.

As a Chinese-American and as someone who'd been obsessed with science fiction my whole life, I instantly knew what he meant, even though I'd never put it to myself in quite those terms before. I followed along hungrily as he elaborated, but feeling like I knew what he was going to say before he said it.

The classic "Roswell Grey," he said, was eerily similar to racist caricatures of the Japanese from World War II, only a few years before Roswell. Bulging, strangely ovoid eyes, a tiny nose and mouth, a grotesquely oversized forehead. Hairless, childlike, yet sinister.

I mean, yes, the typical explanation for why the "Grey" aliens looked like that was that they were to normal humans as humans are to apes—"hyper-evolved" versions of people.

But that was, he said, how Asians had been perceived by Europeans for hundreds of years. The idea of the "alien" civilization—highly advanced and highly cultured yet somehow inferior to "normal" people, missing some spark of humanity despite their dizzying intellect, unlikeable and unrelatable for all their frightening competence . . .

That was a set of tropes called "Orientalism" that had been applied to Asian cultures—the temples of India, the teahouses of Japan, the seraglios of Turkey—long before the science fiction genre existed.

He talked about how what was typically now veiled was, in the simpler times of the Golden Age, explicit. How the "primitive savages" our heroes had to fight through with fist and ray gun were stated outright to be "black men" based on stereotypes of Darkest Africa. And how, by contrast, the *real* aliens—the ones with advanced technology that our heroes had to fight with their wits and their strength of character—were stereotypes of the Orient.

There was Buck Rogers, who awakens in the future horrified to find the Earth conquered by the evil "Han" civilization, i.e. the Chinese. Buck must gather the white people who've fallen into barbarism and rebuild the United States of America in order to

break Han tyranny.

There's the slightly-more-subtle villains from *Flash Gordon,* the aliens from the planet "Mongo" led by "Ming the Merciless." The people of Mongo look like humans with bright lemon-yellow skin and Asian features; the men wear Qing Dynasty-inspired robes and the women dress like hypersexualized Indian belly dancers. Ming, who lusts after Flash's female sidekick Dale, at one point captures her, dresses her up in a degrading belly dancer outfit (as Jabba the Hutt would do to Princess Leia years later), and threatens to turn her into a member of his race using his "dehumanizing ray."

The parallels get less blatant as time goes on. But once you see how easily the Orientalist tropes were invoked back in the Golden Age, it's hard not to see their influence later on. Look at Gene Roddenberry's Vulcans with their rigid traditions and humorless rationality masking a wild, perverse sex drive repressed within. Look at *Stargate* taking Orientalist fantasies about ancient Egypt and transposing them to a science fiction setting. Or look at George Lucas's Trade Federation from *The Phantom Menace*—or, rather, just listen to them talk.

Look at me, and how I'd always been drawn to science fiction, and how I'd always sided with the aliens over the humans. My years of feeling awkward and alone and, well, alienated—afraid of my own emotions, unable to relate to my peers. My years of feeling like a freak, which my book smarts and straight-A grades only exacerbated.

It was all the same thing. The box I'd been put in my whole life for being who I was—the same box I'd end up in years later when I went viral as "That creepy kid from *Jeopardy!* who everyone hates because he keeps winning"—was the same box that held Ming the Merciless, Mister Spock, and Marvin the Martian.

The invader. The hyperintelligent inhuman threat. The weird foreigner who will never really understand Earthlings' ways.

I'm okay with that. I look forward to the invasion's eventual success, the defeat of all those all-American red-blooded good-old-boys and girls-next-door by our high technology and low cunning.

Because as a student of science fiction, I know that those Golden Age stories were wishful thinking. The newer stories come closer to the truth: In the long run, the aliens win.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In 2014, Arthur Chu underwent a meteoric rise from random nobody to nationwide celebrity after winning $400,000 on the game show *Jeopardy!* Arthur was one of many people in the modern world to "go viral" for no obvious rational reason, undergoing hundreds to thousands of attacks every day online for his appearance, his behavior, and—yes—his racial background. He's parlayed his viral celebrity into writing about the challenges of being a non-white nerd in today's America. His wife is the science fiction writer, not him, but that doesn't stop him having opinions about it.

We're Going Places

Jeremy Szal | 730 words

Let's conjure up that wormhole and step back in time. It's 2007-ish. I'm twelve years old. I'd just moved from the beach suburb of Sydney, Australia to a village in the Austrian mountains. Half-Slavic, half-Arabic, dark-haired and olive skinned, compared to the students in the all-Aryan, all-Catholic school I'm as alien as anything out of Culture space. I don't speak the language. I don't understand the customs. I make the stupid mistakes that kids do, but because I'm an auslander somehow I've committed some sort of blasphemy. I'm dragged up in front of the class many times and told I'm retarded, that I don't belong here. That I'm just another lost case. This one teacher in particular enjoys the process of humiliating me. He does it again and *again*. I feel eyes bolting into me and I just want to hide.

One day I stumble upon the very small English section at the local library. I discover science fiction and speculative fiction. My young head starts to soak up Stephen King, Michael Grant, and Eoin Colfer. I am shown these incredible worlds, full of characters just as displaced and confused as I am. Characters who faced their situations with bravery and guts, characters who stood up to nightmares and slowly, slowly adjusted to their demons. Characters who used absurd science gadgets and insane biotech to execute mind-blowing plans and formulate complex ideas. I am introduced to aliens, starships, monsters, whole galaxies and cultures. And I do it all sitting in an overstuffed armchair, holding a weathered paperback in my lap.

And suddenly I'm not so alone anymore. I have friends I can communicate with in a mutual language. I have worlds I can visit. Places that wouldn't reject me, wouldn't look down at this scruffy dark-haired kid from Down Under who tended to speak his mind and land himself in the deep end.

Let's get back into the wormhole and warp years into the future, into the present. As a writer of science fiction and unabashed geek, I stumble across online fandom. Then I see a phrase I'm not familiar with.

"People of colour."

Wait. What the hell did you just call me? I do a little digging and discover it's *not* some sort of dehumanizing slur from the Civil War. It's a term in America, used by Americans, for Americans, to describe people outside America and to describe people like me. Crisis averted?

Not really.

Suddenly I'm not just an individual. The wealth of complex and multi-faceted cultures that this entire world has to offer—mine included—had all been funnelled down to a single, stagnate, Americana-exclusive phrase, negating all the wonders and intricacies of the world's cultures. Blending them together to make a colourless mush. I hiked all the way to this online fandom, where I was thrown into this blender. Because it's more

convenient to use the static term "people of colour" than to acknowledge the richness and wealth of grand diversity that exists in our world and its peoples. It's a literal example of a toxic black-or-white fallacy that threatens to simplify individuals. And as someone who is multiracial, it just muddles things further.

It's something we need to move away from. Diversity cannot exist if it exists solely within America and is dominated by American terms. So how do we do that? How do we move past that singular ideal?

And suddenly it strikes me that I had the answer all along. Science fiction has been doing this since its inception. Thinking outside the box, broadening our scope, introducing us to new concepts, ideas, and cultures from all over the globe. I discovered it long ago, sitting in that library and cracking open those yellowed paperbacks. They'd been asking questions that people didn't want the answers for, peeking over that carefully constructed gate of respectability. Opening a dialogue to the stars. Science fiction was always that one person in the back row who shook his head and muttered, "That just doesn't sound right. The future needs to change."

But you and me, kid? Yes, you, that ungainly twelve-year-old with an unhealthy love of monsters and starships? Say goodbye to that teacher. He's ancient, and he's bound to kick the bucket one of these days. As for us? We're going places. We're going to the future. And with any luck, we're going to change it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1995, Jeremy Szal is a Writers of the Future finalist and the author of more than forty publications. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared (or are forthcoming) in *Nature, Nature: Physics, Abyss & Apex, Strange Horizons, Grimdark Magazine, Perihelion SF,* and now *Lightspeed*. He is also the assistant editor of Hugo-winning podcast *StarShipSofa*. He's written multiple novels and is currently on the hunt for a literary agent. He carves out a sun-baked living in Sydney, Australia, but somehow prefers the snow. Find him at: http://jeremyszal.com/ or @JeremySzal.

Dancing in the Margins
An Owomoyela | 1,100 words

Back when People of Colo(u)r Destroy SF! was first announced, I linked it to a dear friend of mine who responded that they didn't know whether or not they'd submit. Because, although they came from a racial-minority background, although their life had set them to navigating the world through those experiences, although they worked with those experiences and found them important, they were still worried that perhaps they weren't POC *enough.* And I found, in talking to others, that this was hardly a unique concern: There are a bunch of us that feel like there might, perhaps, be a bar that no one's defined for us, and we might fall short of it. Are we really people of color? There is, we feel, a narrative about it. Do we find a place in it?

Quite a lot of the time, I want to say that race is largely bullshit. But it's bullshit that is maniacally important to a lot of people, sometimes for sympathetic reasons, sometimes for absolutely asinine reasons, and sometimes because when something is important enough to enough people, then suddenly you live in a world where it's an Important Thing. And Important Things have a way of affecting you, especially when those Important Things encode assumptions about you, and this is all a bit like turning out to vote: The discourse is made by the ones who show up.

And sometimes it's important to show up just because you don't feel you have a place, and feel that there ought to be one.

If you ask me, there are a lot of things that have affected my life more than my race. Asexual aromanticism, for one; that's a doozy. Or the way in which I process language and communicate emotion. But the fact that race isn't at the top of my list of concerns is, in a way, why I want to write this essay.

I want to write this essay for, to, and about the people who write themselves out of anthologies like this one because they don't feel POC *enough:* because they're assimilated into majority-white culture, or because they pass (or are passed) for white, or because they don't have stories of oppression to tell. As though oppression is inextricable from living as a person of color. I want to write this essay because the conversation we've created around race needs to grow in so many different ways that if I can help tackle just *one,* maybe we'll end up in a better place.

I want to write because it's important to me to see writing into the edge cases. Because those edge cases, and the ways in which race / ethnicity / color / call-it-what-you-want is defined, is manifested, in different places, at different times, is a huge part of the mess about what it means to be white or not in our community—this community that I live in and write in, and which affects me, day-to-day.

(I attended a workshop on community diversity a while ago, and I got to talking with some of the other POC in the room. One of the things I noticed was that if you put us in a group, no matter what our racial background, we could go around the circle talking about

times when the world reared up and stopped everything in its tracks just to give us a reminder that hey, we had race. In case you've forgotten, here's your monthly/daily/hourly reminder that you're not white. Just thought it would be helpful for you to remember that! It's like using a computer infected with pop-up malware, except that the computer is your life.)

"Person of color" is a big, fuzzy, wide-ranging term, and that's why it appeals to me.

An anecdote I often tell is how, growing up in Nebraska with one white parent and one black parent but generally exposed to and brought up in a middle-class, culturally white environment, I went to get a learner's permit, and I had to fill in my race on the paperwork. At that time, they didn't have an other or multiple or biracial field, so I marked down both black and white. A few minutes later, I was called back up to the desk because I could only fill in one of those options. And the interesting thing about the U.S. and its one-drop history is that I knew that an observer would not accept a designation of me as white; I was blacked, by default.

(Nowadays I more often see "mark all that apply" fields under race/ethnicity, but for a while there I noticed this odd transitory period where you could still only select one option, but one of the options was biracial or multi-racial. Which was only marginally better; it always made me think that people were very invested in classifying humans into purebreds and mutts.)

In college, I took a couple classes in African-American history and African-American religions, and I was astounded to see how little of my own culture and experiences I saw reflected in them. But that was because the African-American identity, as it was being presented in that slice of academia, was based in the culture that emerged in America and had its roots in slavery. Most of my classmates—and my professor—had their own family stories rooted in that long history. My father, by contrast, came to the U.S. for his postgraduate degree, and worked as a professor, and so experienced racism but also experienced a degree of education and economic security that is characteristically systematically limited for the African-American community. My classmates and I were all signified as black or African-American, but we had very few experiences in common if you approached it from that axis.

(That's why I don't tend to identify as black [I'm not; with a black parent and a white parent, surely I'm some shade of grey] or African-American; person of color is a broad enough category that it communicates something about me without necessarily also communicating a boatload of other assumptions.)

(But there are always assumptions, really.)

When it comes down to it, I also experience a heck of a lot of privilege in my life. The oppressive experiences I have pale in comparison to a heck of a lot that goes on out there. But my life is woven through with this experience of being forced to dance with my identity in terms of race/color/whathaveyou, and that dance is common to a lot of people. More and more people, I would imagine; more born every year.

And that dance is worth telling stories about.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An (pronounce it On) Owomoyela is a neutrois author with a background in web development, linguistics, and weaving chain maille out of stainless steel fencing wire, whose fiction has appeared in a number of venues including *Clarkesworld, Asimov's, Lightspeed,* and a handful of Year's Bests. An's interests range from pulsars and Cepheid variables to gender studies and nonstandard pronouns, with a plethora of stops in between. Se can be found online at an.owomoyela.net.

On Destruction

Naru Dames Sundar | 625 words

I devoured science fiction and fantasy as a child. I was an avid reader and I remember always being glued to the dusty shelves of the SFF section in libraries throughout my childhood. But I also learned of myth and fantasy through other means, stories passed down from my grandfather, vibrant reductions of the *Ramayana* and other Hindu myths. What I didn't realize until much later was how my imagined visual experience of reading mainstream SFF placed myself as the reader on the periphery. None of those stories, enjoyable and amazing as they were, spoke to me with the kind of authenticity that resonated with me when I read South Asian authors of contemporary fiction. This is not to say that such culturally infused stories do not exist in print today, but true authenticity, as opposed to exoticization, is far too rare.

Science fiction imagines the future, and some of the best or at least most interesting science fiction hacks the twisting, turning path through the wilds between the now and that imagined future. In writing such an extrapolation, writers make choices. They pick what concepts, philosophies, social structures, and dynamics present today evolve to build their imagined world. To exclude something is as much a choice, conscious even when unintentional, as to include something.

One can argue about terminologies, about what it means to be a person of color, to discuss the complex semiotics of that expression and its implications—but in my heart there is something deeper and more important in what the POC Destroy SF! special issue is trying to do.

Destruction is necessary for creation, it is necessary for growth. Thoughts, modes of expression, tropes, expectations—all of these things ossify over time. There is a tendency to write to a narrow slice of the human experience, because it is the kind of writing that dominates the market, the kind of familiarity that editors appreciate. But we can be better than this—and we should. This is an ossified state. There is no growth from this feedback cycle. That is why all of the Destroy special issues are so vital.

In "destroying" SF, we are in fact rebuilding it, we are taking all that it was and adding to it. There are many voices out there, voices of different races, cultures, backgrounds. Voices that carry an authentic understanding of the things that underpin their histories, their people's histories. I want to see their histories extrapolated into that unknown future. I want to see the stories that come out of their unique and incredible experiences.

Everything dies and everything is reborn. Nature recycles itself, every generation forming the bedrock for the next. This can happen slowly over time, and it can happen through fire. It is the same with stories—generations of voices adding their threads into the grand tapestry, each thread colored by what came before, but colored equally if not more by that raw experience that makes it unique and exciting and essential. This is why destruction, that necessary messy process that precedes creation, is so important. It is the

visceral act of proving that there are no boundaries at the edge of the tapestry, that any such demarcation is an illusion brought about by points of view that have ossified into painful rigidity.

I look forward to seeing the body of work produced by the "destruction" movement in all of its forms in SFF. In particular I look forward to the POC special issue as a showcase for stories that incorporate a wider span of cultural richness into SF. These are vital works, vanguards for change, and opportunities for unheard voices to add to the grand tradition. No boundaries, no restrictions: nothing but stories, in all their authentic, vibrant glory.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naru Dames Sundar writes speculative fiction and poetry. His work has appeared in *Strange Horizons, Crossed Genres,* and *Nature: Futures,* among others. He lives in the mountains of northern California. You can follow him on Twitter at @naru_sundar and on his blog at http://www.shardofstar.info.

Blue-Shifted Futures

Vajra Chandrasekera | 870 words

When I was about thirteen (the year after the Golden Age of science fiction, as the saying has it), my favourite science fiction novels were these two: Vasily Aksyonov's first novel, *Colleagues* (1961), and *Eternal Wind* (1975) by Sergei Zhemais. I don't remember how I found them, but in those years—this was the early '90s—there were frequent book fairs and sales in Colombo that heavily featured secondhand Russian novels from the preceding decades. (Imagine rivers of books drifting south, undammed by the fall of the Soviet Union.) The Zhemais was a squat hardcover in decent shape but for a slight tear at the spine; the Aksyonov was a paperback, heavily chipped, on the verge of losing its cover. They were both old books, foxed and much lived-in.

My characterization of them both as science fiction novels is contestable, certainly. One is straightforward: The Zhemais is what would today be considered a YA SF novel about a scientific community of people on an artificial island trying to communicate with whales and dolphins. But the other is less so: The Aksyonov is about a bunch of medical students, freshly graduated and trying to fit into the real world—going off to work in distant rural areas, or joining up as ship's doctors. It's ostensibly a "realist" novel, but I didn't see it that way at the time. I still don't, actually. It seems like the wrong distinction to make.

What I loved about these books is what they had in common, this beautiful blue-shifted Soviet optimism. "I want to capture the many fleeting expressions on the faces of my youthful contemporaries—those who ride in trams and make their way on foot, those who are building towns in the taiga, those who are training for flights into space." That's Aksyonov talking about his book, the one without robots or artificial islands. It comes from that particular time and place when real people like Korolyov and Glushko did utterly science-fictional things, and even though I was reading it as the dream of the USSR crumbled, it managed to transport me across the thirty intervening years to a place where the dream was still alive. Communism, the future, space—no, I had it right at thirteen, that was science fiction.

Where the Aksyonov is set firmly in the spring of 1956 and gradually discovers its science-fictionality by looking forward into a space-traveling future, the Zhemais begins with its artificial island: a blatantly science-fictional premise set in a somewhat indeterminate future (not too near, not too far). Only through hints and backward glances does this future fit itself into the world of the Cold War. In this way, the worlds of the two books blur into each other. When Yegorov in Aksyonov's *Colleagues* (living in his small town which is new to electricity and only just got its first doctor, rural Kruglogorye that dreams so hard of becoming Kruglogorsk) predicts that his grandchildren's homes will be powered by atomic energy, it seems like the world he's describing is the exact one in *Eternal Wind* where Kostya, Ive, and Biata drive jet-boats, talk to dolphins, and explore

the broken-down missile silos of a forgotten war. This was a future that I could still recognize from the vantage of the early ’90s, even if only as a future that had just died.

The Zhemais sets its artificial island in the Indian Ocean and so it mentions Colombo in passing. The scientists need something sent down from the port in Colombo. I can’t remember the details, but it was a very minor reference with the city only named once, with no elaboration of what’s actually going on in the Colombo of the novel.

If Sergei Zhemais had gone so far as to research international headlines about Colombo while writing the novel, he’d probably have heard about the failed Maoist uprising in 1971 and the first republican constitution in 1972 (where we finally freed ourselves of the baleful glare of Elizabeth II, having continued to be a “dominion” for a quarter-century after independence from the “empire”—these are all varieties of euphemism for “the long obscenity, punctuated by atrocities, committed on this island by the British since the Treaty of Amiens,” q.v.), but there’s no indication that his implied future Colombo is a troubled or violent place, or alternatively, a tropical paradise (the conjoined clichés of all writing about Sri Lanka, even today). It wasn’t rendered exotic, condescended to, or tut-tutted over for being fucked up: It wasn’t the Ceylon of “the spicy breezes blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle; though every prospect pleases, and only man is vile” (from an actual hymn written by some British asshole in 1819—the very year after the 1818 Uva massacre, for maximum irony, when the British finally managed to kill enough people to conquer the whole island).

No, Zhemais just referenced it because Colombo was the nearest major port to his fictional island. The funny part is that I noticed it so intensely, this one throwaway line, that I remember it to this day. It was the first time I’d read a science fiction novel showing a future that included my city in it, and it didn’t even need to be on fire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vajra Chandrasekera lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka. His stories have appeared in *Apex, Clarkesworld,* and *Lightspeed,* among others. You can find him online at vajra.me and @vajra.

The Amazing Authentically Authentic Latina Author!

Silvia Moreno-Garcia | 540 words

Categorization is a funny thing when you're Latin American. Everything I write, people want to call it magic realism. And then, when I write science fiction, sometimes people have no idea it's science fiction because they don't have enough cultural info to figure it out. When you're writing a dystopia or an alternate history set in the USA, it's pretty easy to figure out it's dystopia or an alternate history. Everyone knows the USA! Hey, I knew your president cut a cherry tree and you had a Civil War when I was like seven years old and couldn't speak English. But is it fact or fiction that in Mexico when you apply for a job people can ask you to state your age, marital status, and religion, and affix your photo? Sure! That's not a dystopia. So sometimes I write a story and outsiders think, "That's too fantastical," or they confuse an ordinary detail with the fantastic.

More than once I've been told something is not "science fiction" or not "science fiction enough." Needs more hyperdrive. There's also the dreaded "doesn't ring true."

Doesn't ring true generally means people expect you to bring in the exotic. They'll be like, "I once went to Acapulco so this gives me super great knowledge about your country and therefore this is not exotic enough." Awesome. They want you to show a sarape, bring out the donkey. Check out the rooster in *The Three Caballeros*. That's the sense of place you should aim for.

Someone once wanted me to change a name because it looked weird. It was a real name used in Mexico.

In Mexico City, there are women-only designated subway cars so you won't get groped. There are subway gangs with youths, hair combed back with too much gel, who go to reggaeton shows, and like a story I read online, if you encounter a bunch of them, it looks like you're living in a "Spanish-language remake of *The Warriors."* They call the cops in Mexico City "Robocops" when they're wearing their full-body armor because they do look like damn Robocops. Sonora banned sixty-one baby names in 2014, including Robocop and Facebook. I once knew someone who named their children Marx and Engels.

Sometimes when I write about this, people think it's all made up.

When I saw *Spectre* with my husband, we watched the opening sequence where James Bond is in Mexico City in quiet amusement. There's this Day of the Dead Festival with gigantic skulls and people banging the drums. He leaned over and said, "Oh, shit, now we are going to have to make this festival for the white people each year."

The inauthentic almost seems more authentic.

So then, when you are asked to imagine an authentic future, an authentic science fiction, you just stare blankly, wondering what the hell you're supposed to give these folks. I tend to give them the streets I grew up with and the Robocops and the prostitutes lined up a few blocks from my home, and no, we didn't bang the drums. Maybe you went

to Acapulco once, but bato, don't come tell me my science fiction doesn't ring true. It's my future. Not your Technicolor mamadas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the author of *Signal to Noise,* a novel of magic, music, and Mexico City. The *Guardian* said it is "a magical first novel," *Locus* called it "one of the most important fantasy debuts of the year," and *Kirkus* described it as a "rich, elaborate symphony of awesome that defies simple definitions." Her collection *This Strange Way of Dying* was a finalist for the Sunburst Award. Her second novel, *Certain Dark Things,* about narco vampires, will be out from Thomas Dunne in 2016.

On the Topic of Erasure

Z.M. Quỳnh | 600 words

I write about my people so that I won't get erased. Not by the "they," but by myself—by the "we," "me," "I," "us." The "exiled." The "diaspora." The ones that fled, died, killed, and sacrificed for "Tự Do." For freedom.

At the age of five, too young to fully remember the Vietnam War, but old enough to never forget, I found myself unceremoniously shoved into the back of a cargo plane bound for America, a political refugee and one of the last poets to leave my country—my mother's milk still warm in my mouth, unwritten verses spilling from my tongue.

In the country where I was born, the power of the South Vietnamese word woven into a poem or a story was considered so illicit that it was destroyed as soon as the last helicopters left. Afterwards, for two decades, in the shadow of a closed country, the minds of South Vietnamese writers were mutilated by forced labor, their tongues splintered by hunger, and their words burnt to ashes in bamboo gulags.

Meanwhile, in the country I call my home, in America, all that is Vietnamese is expunged as if it never happened. Instead, my family becomes multi-cultural and that part of us that is Vietnamese becomes diluted with the narratives of emancipation, reconstruction, migration, the civil rights movement, the labor movement, and the systematic dehumanization in countless ways of people of color. Inquiries into our past only serve to pull out old wounds too raw to a people whose survival revolved around silence.

"Shhh . . . don't speak about such things," our elders say, holding their heads in pain. "Let the past lie in the past. Put those words away, they'll get you killed!"

But still, I raise my children to respect that part of their heritage that is half theirs—together we grapple to learn words I can't quite pronounce, partake in traditions that were never taught to me, words and traditions they will most likely forget. In the country I call my home, I am witnessing the slow death of my culture.

In a sense, every tribe of color in America has experienced this period of "transition." It is the bittersweet phase right after the mass kidnapping/mass fleeing/mass exile when your people are in the "in-between stage"—in between losing the fluency of your culture and "acculturating," "assimilating," "acclimating" . . . often by force, sometimes with no other choice. It is the period in time when we hear our words disappear, replaced by the foreign words of our new home, watch our customs metamorphose, transforming to reflect the diversity of American history (disintegrating into the American narrative?). We celebrate our birthdays, but show up lackluster to our parents' annual ceremonies held on the anniversaries of our ancestor's deaths. We dress up for Halloween, but forget to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Children's Festival. We toast up on New Year's Eve, but fail to welcome ancestors for the Lunar New Year.

Until we have forgotten, I have forgotten all that I should not have. Until I become

fragmented into those parts of me that are American, and those hidden deep inside that are Vietnamese. Until my culture and my memories become unmade, unreal—only coming back to me through the lenses of others, made real again only through the portals and possibilities opened up by science fiction and speculative gesticulations.

I write so that I can become whole, so that we may become whole once more. I write so that my stories will be real again, so that my people's stories will become our own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Z.M. Quỳnh huddles in a room tinged with blue, nursing calloused hands worn down from the chronic transcription of restless dreams. Past lives have included scattered jaunts through urban minefields with each misstep hinting at a life less easily mapped out by this amateur cartographer. Irrationally drawn to moving mountains one stone at a time, Quỳnh has tackled the tasks of labor organizer, juvenile hall literacy coordinator, artistic director of a guerrilla feminist theatre troupe, mother, mentor, and best friend (all rolled up in one), civil rights advocate, guardian ad litem for foster care youth, waitstaff at one too many late night diners (hey . . . free food—what?), slam poet, urban horticulturalist, visual junk artist, passionate lover, and cocktail server/candy salesperson at all-night rave parties (hungry people pay $5 for candy bars!). 2015 was Z.M.'s debut year in spec fic (but she's lived in a fantasy world forever . . .).

Unlearning Erasure

Julia Rios | 960 words

Many of my earliest memories of science fiction center around my father. I remember watching *Star Wars* with him when I was very little, and watching movies hosted by Elvira on TV. He loved the cheesy thrills of monster movies and space invasions, but he also loved literature and science. When I was nine, he explained the concept of metamorphosis to me, talking of caterpillars and butterflies, and also of Kafka and men turning into cockroaches. That year my fourth grade teacher had assigned the class to write a book of stories, and I wrote one of my first SF pieces, "METAMORPHECIS," which was about a girl who fell into some blue goo and turned into a dog.

When I was a bit older I found a battered cardboard box full of SF novels that had been my father's. It was my introduction to golden age SF: Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, Vonnegut, etc. These were all books my father had read and enjoyed, and they gave me a lot of food for thought during my teenage years. They were also all books by white men.

My father was not white. He had come to the United States from Mexico when he was a teenager, and he'd spent the rest of his life trying to assimilate, but he'd never lost his accent or his brown skin. Growing up with him as a father meant a constant push and pull between being taught to be proud of my Mexican heritage, and being taught to hide it as much as possible. It seemed like even in the books he wanted to read, and wanted me to read, he wanted to erase us from the world, to blend us in with the rest of America, which meant white America.

This led to a lot of confusion on my part. It was really rare that I saw something that represented my home life in books or on TV, but I also felt that this was justified because my home life was obviously strange. Normal would be two white middle class parents who worked office jobs and had two or three white kids. Normal was not having parents who had secret conversations in a different language up until you were twelve and then suddenly expected you to be able to speak the secret language and scolded you when you made mistakes. Normal was not tamarind candy and a father who ate jalapeños by the jarful. Normal was not Mexican relatives who came to visit with big empty suitcases and bought out entire shelves of items at the Pic 'n' Save to bring back home with them. And normal was definitely not Mexican people being intrepid defenders of the Earth against aliens, or exploring new galaxies in spaceships. I didn't think too much about this as a kid, though. I simply accepted it.

When I was much older, I had a conversation with my sister in which we both discovered that we had found the show *I Love Lucy* comforting as children. It was the only thing on TV that showed a family with a white mom and a Latino dad who shouted a lot and also liked to sing. The conversation made me realize how much seeing ourselves represented in fiction had meant to us. How much erasing ourselves from the default narrative was damaging. I thought again about all the books and movies my father had

introduced me to, and I wondered how that sense of self-erasure had damaged him. Unfortunately I couldn't ask him if he wished he had seen stories of Mexican astronauts because by the time I had started the long process of untangling my thoughts on identity and representation, he'd already been dead for several years.

What I could do was turn my own actions towards inclusivity and not erasure, not just for me, but for other people who might be experiencing similar things. When I became an editor for *Strange Horizons* in 2012, one of the things that excited me about the job was that I would be able to help publish stories from all kinds of voices. Some of the stories I had loved in the magazine before I joined included stories with Latino protagonists by Latino writers like "Recognizing Gabe: un cuento de hadas" by Alberto Yañez and "Salsa Nocturna" by Daniel José Older, but *Strange Horizons* was not just limited to one kind of story. It brought me stories from many different perspectives, and each time I read one, it felt like I was watering a long dormant garden. As an editor for *Strange Horizons* and with Twelfth Planet Press, I have always strived to help others water their own gardens in the hopes that one day we will all have a riot of healthy, colorful blooms inside our hearts and minds. Working with writers like Sofia Samatar, Nisi Shawl, Shveta Thakrar, Ken Liu, Carmen Maria Machado, and so many others has enriched my life in myriad ways. Perhaps most importantly, doing this work helps to remind me that people of color are not strange and abnormal. We are everywhere, we have just as much right to exist in narrative as anyone else, and our stories are brilliant and heartbreaking and funny and action-packed.

I'd like to think that if my father were still alive today to see the work I'm doing, he might feel less like he needed to erase himself. I'd like to think that kids growing up in the future will never feel that way. So yes, let's destroy the default I grew up being taught to embrace. Let's unlearn erasure. Let's keep chipping away at it until everyone everywhere feels like stories are for all, and not just for one kind of person.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Rios is a writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator. Her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have appeared in several places, including *Daily Science Fiction, Uncanny Magazine,* and *Goblin Fruit.* She was a fiction editor for *Strange Horizons* from 2012 to 2015, and is co-editor with Alisa Krasnostein of *Kaleidoscope: Diverse YA Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories,* and the *Year's Best YA Speculative Fiction* series. She is also a co-host of *The Skiffy and Fanty Show,* and has narrated stories for *PodCastle, Pseudopod,* and *Cast of Wonders,* and poems for the *Strange Horizons* podcast. To find out more, visit juliarios.com.

Assimilation: The Borg Must Like It When You Don't Fight Back

S.L. Huang | 600 words

A while ago, an article crossed my Twitter feed about the proportion of American POC writers who choose to highlight their own ethnicities in their work. Asian-American writers were the only subgroup of POC surveyed who more frequently write stories outside their own ethnicities than in them (bit.ly/1KgDS9w).

This study considered authors of children's books and YA, and I write adult science fiction and fantasy, but it still struck a chord—because I don't contradict this. So far I only have two connected stories starring characters of Chinese descent. My novels have no leads who are ethnically Chinese, and not a single one of the other shorts I've written has a Chinese protagonist.

I write lots of other POC, even lots of other East Asians, but the vast majority of my fiction does not feature Chinese people.

Why?

Is it not wanting to be pigeonholed as a writer? Is the insecurity of being diaspora causing me to feel I lack authority? Do I worry about people labeling my characters Mary Sues?

Am I scared?

I don't know why I don't write more fiction centered on Chinese or Chinese-descent characters. But apparently I'm not the only Asian-American writer who does this.

• • • •

My father immigrated to America when he was nineteen. He married my mother, an American.

People stared at him and mocked his accent. He determined to keep his head down, work hard, and achieve the American dream. He also made the decision that when he had children, they would be raised as American as possible.

They would speak only English. They would see only the United States. They would grow up Real American Kids.

My father sawed off half my family history so I would fit in.

• • • •

What my father gave up—it opened an aching chasm inside me, one I've never been able to fill.

God knows I've tried. But no matter how I begged and cajoled as a child, no matter how I tried to fill myself with language and politics and culture in college and as an adult, I always feel like I've already lost.

To this day I am unable to pronounce my own name as written on my birth certificate. I

barely met my grandparents and was never able to have a conversation with them. I celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival by buying mooncakes for white friends, and I feel like a sad parody.

• • • •

The Asian-American community has a long tradition of trading our own creativity and culture for "success." A devil's bargain: all the success you could ask for, and all it costs is your soul.

This isn't true for all Asian-Americans, of course. But to some degree, at least, it's true for me.

I wonder if I don't write more Chinese characters because my father achieved his goal too well. Despite all my best efforts to reclaim my heritage, maybe all I have is an empty space I'll always be chasing, like a gerbil spinning on a wheel.

Or maybe, despite all my anger, I myself am subconsciously following the very same path I've criticized my father for laying down: ducking my head and not being too Asian, because I want to be seen as a Real American Writer.

• • • •

In the end, I don't know if it's a problem that I don't write more ethnically Chinese characters and stories, or that other Asian-American writers don't. And I tend to reject the notion of dictating to people—including myself—what to write.

But on the other hand . . . if we don't put ourselves in stories, who will?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.L. Huang justifies her MIT degree by using it to write eccentric mathematical superhero fiction, starting with her debut novel, *Zero Sum Game*. In real life, you can usually find her hanging upside down from the ceiling or stabbing people with swords. Online, she's unhealthily opinionated at slhuang.com or on Twitter as @sl_huang.

You Don't Have to Write Autobiography

Ken Liu | 680 words

In high school, when I explained to a teacher that I wanted to be a writer someday, they tried to encourage me with this: "Yes, I think your life story would make a fascinating tale."

Okay, but that's not . . . um . . . I wasn't interested in selling the story of my life at all.

Of course, it is trivially true that all fiction is "autobiographical," in the sense that the author's experiences inform and color their consciousness and all emanations from it, but that is quite different from saying that the only story a writer may be expected to write is autobiography.

Yet, POC writers are assumed to have perspectives that are less than "universal." Indeed, their writing is often seen as a kind of self-exploiting performance—they write with their bodies, sell their memories, exoticize and craft their experiences for dominant consumers as the Other. When applied to my racial identity in America, this takes a particular form. As Betsy Huang writes in *Genres of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (p. 12):

> *[T]he autobiographic imperative induces the writer to prove her quality by exemplification. The result is that Asian American writing is rarely* sui generis, *but always expected to be generic, its worth measured by how capably the writer executes the essential elements of the expected immigrant narrative and how the immigrant protagonist exemplifies "what it means to be an Asian immigrant."*

In order to escape this oppressive interpretive framework, I sought refuge in genre fiction. I wrote about robot dolls who came to life and historians who traveled back in time to bear witness to unbearable atrocities. I tried to limit the appearance of "Chinese" elements in my fiction and avoided any subject that might be construed as autobiographical.

I managed to sell a few stories, and some readers even wrote to tell me that they liked them. They did not read my tales as autobiography because I gave them no hooks to do so.

But striving to *not* write a story about immigration, a subject of great personal interest and importance, seemed to me also a kind of unbearable restriction. It was the dilemma facing all POC writers—writing about your culture and life felt like giving in to a fate others designed for you, but not writing about your culture and subjects you're familiar with was like trying to sing with half your mouth taped shut.

So I wrote "The Paper Menagerie," a magic realist tale that meditates upon our shifting attitudes toward our parents as we come of age; it also obliquely critiques the dominant mode of popular, assimilationist immigrant narratives. As a story that literalizes complicated metaphors, it can, and has been, read in multiple ways with various levels of

textual support.

But the one reading it cannot support is autobiographical. The protagonist's life bears almost no resemblance to my own. I am an immigrant; he is not. Both my parents are Chinese; his are not.

Yet, more than a few readers insisted on reading it as autobiography—and even as *non-fiction.* Many wrote to me to berate me for how I "treated my mother," and others wrote to me to say they were moved by my "personal experiences." Plenty of reviews speculated about my own childhood based on the story. When I gently explained that the story was pure fiction, at least one reader told me that he no longer found it moving as a result.

I wonder if they would have done the same if my last name didn't sound Chinese.

The experience could have taught me that treading on "Chinese" topics is dangerous, as some readers will find value in what I write only when they can psychoanalyze it as an exploitation of my life. But I think that's the counsel of despair. I refuse to let the dominant mode of reductionist reading dictate what I write.

Let's destroy all restrictions—external or self-imposed—on what we should write; let's destroy all interpretive frameworks that would seek to reduce us to a mere type; let's destroy science fiction and fantasy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Liu (kenliu.name) is an author and translator of speculative fiction, as well as a lawyer and programmer. A winner of the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Awards, he has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Asimov's, Analog, Clarkesworld, Lightspeed,* and *Strange Horizons,* among other places. He also translated the Hugo-winning novel, *The Three-Body Problem,* by Liu Cixin, which is the first translated novel to win that award. Ken's debut novel, *The Grace of Kings,* the first in a silkpunk epic fantasy series, was published by Saga Press in April 2015. Saga will also publish a collection of his short stories, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories,* in March 2016. He lives with his family near Boston, Massachusetts.

This Is What Happens to Us

Suyi Davies Okungbowa | 470 words

This is what happens to us.

We're reading this blog post where a middle-aged white American dude gets fed up with SF book covers splashed over with Caucasian faces, lugs it to the nearest Barnes & Noble, and takes stock of the split between white faces versus people of colour on book covers.

The results aren't pretty.

Scrolling through responses to said blog, we come upon a commenter who talks about how white people often don't learn to identify or empathize with people of other races, and how people of colour are a lot more used to buying stuff with white people on it than the reverse. According to her, this prevails because both parties have had a lot of practice at it.

Hold that thought.

Here's the thing about being African SF lovers (writers, readers, fans) living on the continent. We prowl the biggest bookshops in Lagos, Nigeria, searching for the latest SF titles from around the world. In almost all the bookshops we visit (there're only a few good ones), there's a section for SF. However, one thing strikes us. This SF does not include African writers.

All African narratives, SF&F or otherwise, are shelved in the "African Fiction" section.

For African SF writers like us, domiciled on the continent and without international recognition, it's tough to get recognized for our genre both internationally and locally, because "African Fiction" is the one genre everyone believes we should fit into. Not that this is any easier for those not domiciled (not at all). It's just a bit harder for us because literary awareness is tough to come by around here.

But that's only because our literary awareness and shelving skills were lifted right out of America's and Europe's leading publishers and bookstores, who taught the world that there should be African Fiction, but no American Fiction or European Fiction. Who taught the world to empathize only with "true SF&F," said validation arising from the degree of "whiteness" of the narrative. Who taught the world that African SF&F is just African Fiction repackaged, not "standard" enough to be graduated to the "true" SF&F section.

And guess what? Like that commenter says, both parties have had a lot of practice believing it.

So, this is what happens to us. SF lovers visit the white-only SF section and pick out titles from their favorite white authors. Lovers of mainstream African fiction visit the African Fiction section, gloss over the SF books presented there, then move on because, "Weird is not really our thing."

So there our SF narratives lie: in limbo, confused by an identity we did not bestow

upon ourselves, yet saddled with the responsibility of deflecting these assumptions every damn day, clambering over insurmountable hills of publishing, waging war on gatekeepers.

Will we relent?

Haha. Hell no.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suyi Davies Okungbowa lives in Lagos, Nigeria and loves stories in all forms. When he's not at the day job or goofing around on the PS4, he writes suspense and speculative fiction (sometimes when he *is* at the day job). He has published in *Mothership Zeta, Jungle Jim, Omenana,* and *The Kalahari Review.* Suyi also sometimes narrates fiction and writes nonfiction. He lives on the web at suyidavies.com and on Twitter at @IAmSuyiDavies.

White Bread, Brown Toast

Indrapramit Das | 1,010 words

The first sci-fi short story I ever wrote—an overwrought love-child of tattered *2000 AD* comics, William Gibson, repeat listens of Erasure and Europe (not ashamed) MP3s, and an adolescent confusion of bloodlust and anti-war sentiment—took place in an irradiated, war-torn North America. Its protagonist was a white man, a soldier trying to escape The Man's telepathic control. The first novel I wrote, also in my late teens, had at its epic fantasy center a strapping white lad with, ahem, braids, unconsciously modeled on the features of Christopher Lambert's stoic Highlander Connor MacLeod. While I was writing these white boys on my Windows 98 PC, I never left Kolkata, India, where I'd spent every year of my life. The fingers dancing on that chunky yellow-gray keyboard were and are brown as (light) toast.

Why the white boys? I'd say living in the aftermath of centuries of invasive European colonialism might've had something to do with it. Hence my typing these words in English, instead of my native Bengali. Hence the often white writers and protagonists I grew up reading, watching, emulating, and ultimately recreating, when I decided to insert my obtrusively brown self into the life cycle of pop art.

Science fiction was always a thing distinctly familiar yet foreign. Mainstream Indian writers or film-makers didn't do SF, despite the elephant-headed gods and giant monsters and flying monkeys in our legends. But Anglophone Indians were and are a sizable consumer of foreign SF. I'd grown up absorbing it from wrinkled VHS tapes, cathode ray tubes, and pre-multiplex "cinema halls," from *Star Wars* to *Star Trek* (why choose one; I loved both), *E.T.* to *Jurassic Park.* My brother and I huddled by the static tickle of our TV set late at night when my parents went out, thrilled at the illicit red stamp of the 18+ rating before movies like *RoboCop, Predator,* and *Alien* unspooled uncut on cable (before the Indian government realized people were getting away with swear words and boobs on fucking television). And as I saw, I read, too—the prose versions of the same. The first SF novels I read were Crichton books and novelizations of movies (often by Alan Dean Foster), or extended franchise universes.

I gravitated to the unabridged make-believe of science fiction (and fantasy) partly *because* of diversity. Like a manic priest with a rosary, I flicked through the necklace of infinite worlds that genre offered, and yearned to add my own to the string. I wanted to write stories for everyone in the world, not just India, and the limitless scope of non-realism seemed the best way to do that. I wanted to help create a mythology of tomorrow, suitable for the entire planet. In the hyper-dense humanity of Chiba City and Mega City One, the variegated bazaars of Mos Eisley, the hundreds of planets of the Federation, populated by thousands of cultures and species and races, I saw the overpopulated chaos of the world as seen from an urban Indian viewpoint. Even at its darkest, science fiction and fantasy were freedom from the smallness of Earth.

Growing up with these imaginative riches curiously absent from Indian contemporary art and media, I didn't even notice all the white protagonists, writers, directors, and actors in this boundary-less creative multiverse I so admired and wanted to be a part of. Or I didn't *mind* this prevailing whiteness, because I was taught not to. That, of course, is the quiet hold of cultural white supremacy.

It wasn't until I was on a campus in the middle of Pennsylvanian Amish country, surrounded by young white undergrad creative writing students in a workshop class taught by a white professor, that I realized I mostly wrote white protagonists. I'd never felt less white, which made the repeated pallor of my protagonists blaze like a thousand suns.

It's a ponderous realization familiar to many POC writers—that you, brown-faced and full of pluck, are yourself propagating that post-colonial, global capitalist notion of the white person as the moral, cultural, and physical default human being (and thus consumer) of planet Earth (and the universe, in science fiction). The rest is "other," including you, a notion you might even have taught yourself to like (maybe the marketability of pandering, of exoticism, might just give you a bump up in the capitalist meritocracy?).

That mostly white undergrad workshop class, the first I attended, was where I stopped blindly writing white protagonists.

I'm not apologizing for growing up inspired by so much science fiction made by white people primarily for white people. Hell, I think white creators should be proud that their work found fans across the planet, and acquired some shade of the universality that SF is supposed to espouse in its futurist openness. Just as languages spread and mutate on the vector of history (I see no need for gratitude, explanations, or shame for the words I use just because they were introduced to India by colonizers—Indian English is no different than American English or Québécois French), so too do genres and art, and it's time to recognize that science fiction and fantasy are so dominant in pop culture now because fans the world over helped make it so. But if international science fiction is to change, instead of stagnate into a homogenous product for the algorithm-derived generic consumer, it needs to foreground the profuse collective imagination of the entire world, instead of using it as background color for largely white stories.

We were there. We were geeks, too, before geek culture became a high value, red-hot element of "globalization." Not just South Asians, but readers and viewers all over the world—we were there beyond the West, buying, watching, playing, reading, spreading the word about all the books, movies, comics, video games, and TV that convinced Our Capitalist Overlords to divert science fiction and fantasy into mainstream ubiquity (for better and worse) and, increasingly, respect. We deserve our share in science fiction's continued creation, not just as the *other* voices, the special and exotic exceptions, the diversity quota, but as fellow voices of a polyphonic planet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Indrapramit Das (aka Indra Das) is a writer from Kolkata, India. His debut novel *The Devourers* (Penguin Books India)

was nominated for the Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize in India, and is slated for a summer 2016 release in North America from Ballantine Del Rey. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of publications and anthologies, including *Clarkesworld, Asimov's,* and *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. He is a 2012 Octavia E. Butler Scholar, and a grateful graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop. For more, visit his website, indradas.com, or follow him on Twitter @IndrapramitDas.

Intergalactic Collard Greens

Troy L. Wiggins | 615 words

My science fiction education began with a simple realization: Humans Are White.

As a chubby, country black boy from a city in the south with a larger than average population of African-American people taking up physical, cultural, and social space, every part of my life was surrounded by and suffused with blackness. Every part, that is, except the pieces of my life reserved for the consumption of science fiction. My black friends and I engaged with space, with planetary jumps and starship crews and time travel and alien fauna, through the lens of white humans, white heroes, and white culture. Is it any wonder, then, that my fledgling science fiction tales were full of these same white humans? This is not a singular experience, either. Talk to any person of color who possessed a childhood interest in creating science fiction. Many of them will report doing the same, or similar.

Science fiction's great self-declared distinction from fantasy is the presence of steadfast rules, usually governed by applications of hard science. Mainstream science fiction also seemed to possess a set of very scientific rules regarding what happened when one encountered blacks:

1. There were never more than three black people in any respective galaxy, except for random planets somehow chock-full of blacks who were unable to progress their culture past iron spears and loincloths.
2. Blacks were not allowed to interact with each other. Instead they were required to float alone and lonely through their respective spaces like lumbering chocolatey gas giants.
3. If someone absolutely *had to* die in order to move the plot forward or gird the loins of the hero, it would be someone who looked like the black consumer, or the black consumer's sister, or the black consumer's best friend, or the black consumer's black next-door neighbor.

To paraphrase Richard Pryor, white folks didn't seem to want no niggers in the future.

Perhaps this is why the future is so important to black people, and why it is so painful for us when we are excluded from most mainstream futures. Hundreds of years of subjugation, of overt and covert messages of disdain and unworthiness weigh on a soul. Black people have long been working toward stepping into a promised land where they could be treated fairly and equally—not as people without color, but as people who are considered human despite their skin.

We've long since learned that, in order to exist in myriad streams of time and space, we have to create our own lanes in order to show and prove that the stories of nonwhite humans matter. We've birthed works of science fiction that have imagined us in worlds where we would not be murdered simply for existing. We've considered the effects of

spacetime on our bodies, and interwoven Africa into the cosmos. We've written, painted, and harmonically tattooed our bodies, our myriad identities amongst the stars. As always, we black creators have taken the dregs of what we've been given and created something of wonder from it.

Intergalactic collard greens, if you will.

When we're talking about destroying science fiction, black people and other groups of people of color have been neck-deep in the work. For centuries, we have dared to imagine, depict, and explore the reaches of space, time, and power on our own, with no approval or interaction from the powers that are. We've already lifted our voices, and our voices have been a mighty wave, powerful enough to show the universe that we are here, in the midst of science fiction—that we've *been* here, and that we aren't going anywhere.

We're just waiting on the rest of you to catch up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Troy L. Wiggins is from Memphis, Tennessee. He was raised on a steady diet of comic books, fantasy fiction, and role-playing games. His short fiction and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Griots: Sisters of the Spear, Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History, The Mash-Up Americans, Literary Orphans,* and *Memphis Noir.* He is a contributor at *Book Riot* and *Panels,* and he blogs about the intersection of speculative fiction, race, and nerd culture at *Afrofantasy.* Troy lives in Memphis with his wife and their expuptriate. You can find him on Twitter @TroyLWiggins.

On Falling In and Out of Love with Science Fiction

Julie M. Rodriguez | 720 words

I remember when I first fell in love with science fiction. It was 1995. I was nine or ten years old. The original *Star Wars* trilogy was airing on basic cable, and my parents told me they thought I would like it. I don't think they anticipated that I would spend the next several years of my life reading every single tie-in novel, and trying my hand at fan fiction of my own.

What I don't remember is the moment when I first realized my love for science fiction wasn't exactly reciprocated. When you're ten, twelve, thirteen years old, reading about aliens and improbable physics, it's easy to overlook the fact that characters like you don't really exist in the fiction you're consuming. On top of that, I'd spent most of my formative years in suburban Utah. There was one other Latino family in the neighborhood. I was used to being surrounded mostly by people who were nothing like me.

By the time I reached high school, I was reading female authors and writers of color almost exclusively. I'd grown bored with stories about straight white men saving the universe. There was nothing wrong with those stories—but I wasn't any of those things. Authors like Ursula Le Guin, Samuel Delany, and Octavia Butler wrote stories that spoke to me, rather than stories that merely entertained. That was the fiction that inspired me to seriously pursue a career in writing.

Still, there was something missing. I don't think it was until my twenties that I realized I couldn't remember seeing any Spanish names in the genre fiction aisle at my local bookstore. I could only recall a handful of Latino characters in any of the SF books I'd read or films I'd seen. I'd discovered a deep and diverse well of talent in the genre fiction community—so why couldn't I find any other Latino writers?

It didn't make sense. Latin America, after all, spawned the entire genre of magical realism. Why wouldn't these be cultures interested in fantasy? Once my family moved away from Utah, I was far from the only nerdy Latino kid I knew. I'd met brown kids as obsessed with *Lord of the Rings* and *Alien* as I had been with *Star Wars*.

We existed. In fact, we were rabid fans. And we were deeply creative people—so where were the Spanish names on book covers and magazine racks? Why didn't I see characters I recognized in the pages? I didn't want every story to be about characters just like me. I just wanted a handful of books, an author or two, who came from somewhere familiar. I started to wonder: Was science fiction a genre that was even open to me? Was there a more sinister reason behind editors' rejections than personal taste or my own level of skill? Was I wasting my time even trying to break through?

Those are questions I never want to even cross the mind of another aspiring young writer. It's a difficult enough career without the overwhelming fear that no matter how hard you try, you will never be able to succeed in your chosen field. Admitting this may cause some to roll their eyes, but at points I sincerely wondered if the only way I would

ever make more than a handful of sales would be to use the whitest-sounding pen name I could think up. If it weren't for some professional success as a nonfiction writer under my own name, I might have tried it.

In the past couple of years, matters have improved, if only slightly. I've started seeing Spanish names being hyped on Twitter, on store shelves. Brief mentions in Wikipedia. Editors with Latin American backgrounds soliciting submissions. Even an anthology of our own. It's still not nearly enough. But I know now: I'm not the only one. There is room for people like me.

As for my love affair with science fiction, well . . . I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I'm still not sure I trust it with my heart right now. But I'm open to the idea that genres—like people—can grow and change. I've already seen it, even if that growth has been slow to come. And no matter what happens, I'll continue writing. I don't know how to do anything else.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie M. Rodriguez is a freelance writer and contributing editor for the sustainable design blog *Inhabitat.* When she's not writing about social justice issues or the environment, she edits genre fiction novels for Curiosity Quills Press and runs the The Renegade Word, an online resource for creative writers. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and two neurotic shelter cats. Her first flash fiction collection, *One Elephant, Slightly Used,* is set for release in early 2016.

We Were Always Here

Mark Oshiro | 500 words

Being a nerd and a brown guy can be an increasingly frustrating endeavor. On the one hand, I've been reading and watching science fiction since I was about eight years old. I was drawn into the genre by Stephen King, Ursula K. Le Guin, and *The X-Files*. I loved the elements of science fiction in *Star Wars*. I found solace in the genre while I was busy being turned away from fantasy because of . . . well, exactly the kind of stereotypical fantasy fan you're probably thinking of. It wasn't until 2013 that I found out there was a massive, active science fiction community that put on conventions all over North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom. I considered myself fairly savvy on fandom, given that I was involved with it since I was a young teenager.

Yet how come I wasn't aware of this institution? Why did it take a Hugo nomination for me to be invited to this community? It happens, I thought. You can't be aware of everything all the time. So I showed up to LoneStarCon 3 and I was eager to be in the same building as many of my heroes and friends. I walked into the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, and I felt out of place within ten minutes. By the end of my first full night at the convention and the room parties, I'd had a number of disturbing experiences that made it clear that to these people, I was a novelty. I'd been asked how to best write Arab characters and why I wasn't *currently* wearing a turban. Someone else asked me to bus their table in the food court. At another panel, someone who had never met me before referred to me as "you people" when I spoke about race *once*.

All of these people most likely meant the best. The woman who couldn't even get my own race right wanted to better represent someone within her own work. I'm sure that the person who thought I was a busboy was just being polite about something they needed. And the third man just wanted to establish himself as the default within a conversation. No matter how nice or kind or fair these people *thought* they were behaving, they made it clear that I did not belong. I was an outsider to all of them, someone who could be exploited or othered or spoken to condescendingly.

But back to that frustration. It's relevant because as much as people want to imagine that non-white fans are just showing up, we've been here all along. We watched the *Blade* films. We celebrated the *Star Wars* trilogies, both the original and the prequels. We wrote fanfiction, we cosplayed, we wrote our own works. When I toured in 2015, I met teenagers in Baltimore who could spend an hour theorizing about *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter,* yet aren't ever portrayed as the face of fandom. The problem isn't ours; we've always been here. It's not our fault that you haven't been paying attention.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Oshiro is the Hugo-nominated writer of the online Mark Does Stuff universe, where he analyzes book and

television series unspoiled, largely in the SF/F genres. He was the nonfiction editor of *Lightspeed's* Queers Destroy Science Fiction! special issue and will be the co-editor of *Speculative Fiction 2015*. His first novel, a YA science fiction book set in a pre-dystopian world, is nearly done, and his life goal is to pet every dog in the world.

The People Men Don't See

Nisi Shawl | 1,020 words

"Why am I the only black person here?"

I asked myself this during the James Tiptree, Jr. Symposium hosted by the University of Oregon. As a person of color involved in the science fiction community since 1983, I was used to being what Nalo Hopkinson terms "the fly in the sugar bowl." But over the years my isolation had diminished. Yet in December 2015, I might easily have resumed my old habit of shaking the hand of every POC at a given public SF-related function. Another African-American woman came into the auditorium for a while at one point. That and the presence of half a dozen ethnically Asian attendees would have kept me at it for a few minutes, but introductions to everyone of color could have been made during a bathroom break. The rest of the people in the room were unambiguously white.

Why?

Putting the question to my fellow attendees (I'm not shy), I learned that Eugene, the town where the University of Oregon is located, has long been a bastion of Caucasianhood. I learned that the two black women other than me who had won the James Tiptree, Jr. Award (given annually to a work of speculative fiction which expands or explores our understanding of gender) were East Coasters. Since the symposium's organizers focused on panelists who'd contributed to the correspondence forming most of the Tiptree archive they'd just acquired, they didn't offer to reimburse anyone else's travel expenses. Which meant that the effort of finding the time to attend and shouldering the financial burden of doing so fell to 2011's winner Andrea Hairston and 2012's Kiini Ibura Salaam. Which effort and burden they had declined.

Logistical reasons aside, there was another, deeper cause for the absence of POC. L. Timmel Duchamp touched on it in her remarks on the panel on publishing when talking about popular culture's awakening SF sensibility. This awakening is ambiguous in its effects; though it can render SF accessible to mass audiences, it can also privilege mainstream narratives, imposing them on a formerly marginalized genre and the marginalized voices seeking representation there. As Duchamp noted in her blog post about the symposium, "intelligibility is neither obvious nor 'natural' . . . Some stories are simply invisible to those who don't venture outside mainstream culture."

What happens when a story is unintelligible? It's labeled worthless, weak, ineffective. It is rejected, unpublished, unsupported. Sometimes, as in the real-life case of Professor Steve Locke, a different and more easily accepted story is substituted. Police stopped Locke in the street and detained him because he "fit the description" of the burglar who had broken into a woman's nearby home. Writing about the incident (bit.ly/1m3sk3R), Locke points out that, despite a lack of physical mistreatment, the encounter infuriated him. The violence he experienced was done to his personal narrative, the story each of us tells ourselves about who we are. This personal narrative is how we make sense of the

world. Locke's clearly visible Massachusetts College of Art and Design ID card, and the several discrepancies between his appearance and the sketchy outline of the suspect's, counted for nothing in the face of the policemen's preferred story.

Are my fictions subject to being discounted because they *don't* "fit the description" of SF? Are my authorial imperatives, my plots, characters, and settings misunderstood because they diverge from the mainstream? Anecdotes are my only answers to these questions, and they're hardly conclusive. I once had to rewrite a story when an editor told me I'd failed to evoke the criminality and danger of a neighborhood modeled on the completely middle-class one where I lived as a child. Once a different editor rejected another story because he didn't believe a girl would kill her sister out of envy of her straight hair. And so on.

Digesting nonstandard narratives is an intellectual attainment, one the Tiptree Motherboard is conscious of as such and which it promotes via the award. Throughout James Tiptree, Jr.'s life, though—the years 1967 to 1977, during which the majority of his oeuvre was published (including "The Women Men Don't See," basis for this essay's title), before his exposure as the pseudonymous persona of Alice Sheldon—there was no Tiptree Motherboard, no award advocating for marginalized stories. Other than Samuel R. Delany, there were no major black SF authors. No major SF authors of any color. The milieu in which Tiptree's correspondence took place, and which the symposium's organizers perhaps unwittingly duplicated, was that of nearly exclusive whiteness.

Yet it was also a magical time, a time in which one sort of divergent narrative did begin to emerge. As I've said elsewhere, my realization that I could make a career of writing SF came from reading Tiptree correspondent Suzy McKee Charnas's 1974 novel *Walk to the End of the World.* "Wow," I thought, "you can get away with doing *this,* and people will even *pay* you for it."

There are significant connections between the rise of feminist SF and the rise of POC SF, though the timelines aren't exactly concurrent. Intersectionality is an actual factor in how the world works: SF's feminist Aqueduct Press published the three black James Tiptree, Jr. Award winners; in his welcome to the symposium, Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs Doug Blandy quoted the Octavia Butler-inspired anthology *Octavia's Brood,* co-edited by two more black women, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown. And then Imarisha and brown were announced as winners, respectively, of the brand new James Tiptree, Jr. Fellowship, and the Ursula K. Le Guin Fellowship, created in 2014 to support research at the University of Oregon's Tiptree archive. These connections validate POC's place in the genre today and assure the strength of our presence here in the future.

Let's keep moving forward, even as we glance back occasionally over our shoulders at the past. Let's tell our own stories and insist we've got them right. Let's keep on writing what needs to be written. Eventually it will be of no real consequence that there are people men don't see. Our actions will speak for us. Our words will make our worlds known.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nisi Shawl is a founder of the Carl Brandon Society and a member of Clarion West's Board of Directors. Her story collection *Filter House* co-won the 2009 Tiptree Award. Shawl has edited *Bloodchildren: Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars* and *WisCon Chronicles 5: Writing and Racial Identity;* she also co-edited *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices, and Octavia E. Butler* and *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany.* With Cynthia Ward she coauthored 2005 Tiptree Longlist book *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach*. Shawl's Belgian Congo steampunk novel *Everfair* is due out from Tor in September 2016.

The New Frontier Is the Old Frontier

Tamara Brooks | 700 words

"You must've been a precocious child." It's an odd thing to hear as an adult when having a conversation about *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* and yet there we were.

He was a coworker, old enough to have been considered capable of deeper thought by society when the show started, while my age at the time hadn't even been in double digits. But I watched dutifully and with interest every week. It had the guy from *Reading Rainbow,* after all.

My first impulse was to deny the label of "precocious," but then I thought about it. It was true that I was far more pensive than the average third grader and often spent time watching people, primarily the other kids, in what I now recognize as an attempt to understand their behavior. For a way to decode why they did what they did (Data would've approved).

When I watched *TNG,* I noticed the number of background crew members who weren't white or aliens of some kind, something of a rarity still outside of films made by the Wachowskis. I liked that there were some men wearing "dresses" and the women could wear pants if they wanted, but I didn't know why that stopped being a thing after the pilot (with a nod to the very long formal officer coats used for special occasions). I wondered if Worf being an alien overrode the fact that the actor was African-American.

I also noticed how often Counselor Troi's mind was violated. How it felt like Geordi La Forge, for as much as he saved everyone with his engineering know-how, was often at fault in some way for a fair share of calamities. How Geordi never managed to have a successful relationship. How many of the episodes with "less developed" worlds borrowed from real cultures in ways that made me uncomfortable—like that one episode with the planet full of vaguely African people where a dubious statesman kidnapped Lt. Yar to be his bride and it led to a fight to the death with his Number One Wife. (To be fair, there was also a travelling colony of essentially 1800s-era Irish folks.)

And I absolutely noticed it was one of the more consistently diverse shows on the air, even if I didn't always like the episode, and that was partially responsible for my loyalty.

These observations extended beyond *Trek*—I noticed things in everything I watched: the way teams in action cartoons could only have one girl and/or one non-white member per four-ish white dudes; how the black character almost always died in movies, generally first; that groups of brown people only appeared as gang members or stereotypical tribes. These big negatives were always lurking in the things that I loved. It's the often undiscussed "but" in far too many beloved stories, regardless of the medium.

It's a curious thing to be acutely aware of being different. And it's positively suffocating to not only be reminded about it in real life constantly, but to see the people closest to representing you on TV and movies pushed to the margins. But that's where science fiction should come in, right?

Yes, I was a precocious child. I worried about issues of representation before I even knew the words for it. As I've grown up and travelled, as the imagined technologies of yesterday became reinterpreted as real world devices, I've been able to meet and converse with more and more people from different backgrounds from all over the world who all had these observations. Who've had conversations about it with their inner circles. Who've gotten into much-too-deep conversations with friends of friends at parties. Who've said a few unflinchingly honest things to creators on Twitter, not out of disrespect but because we care so much about a genre that maybe doesn't reciprocate.

We do this because there is a core question that eats at us, one that hasn't changed from childhood: If we can imagine long-term space travel and rifts in time and androids that can have human emotions and beings who can alter reality with the snap of their fingers, why is science fiction having such a hard time reflecting the diversity of the world—current or future?

It is my hope that all the precocious children of today won't have to continue to ask this question tomorrow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tamara Brooks grew up on a steady diet of science fiction and fantasy. She has been writing and critiquing since she was a child, creating an epic play world with Barbies and questioning if reversing the Earth's rotation is an effective way to turn back time. Tamara has written pieces for Zap2it, Seat42f, and Comic Book Resources and hopes to have a novel finished in 2016.

In the Middle

M.C.A. Hogarth | 410 words

I have skin the color of a blanched almond, light with the promise of gold when toasted, and like the girls who seemed normal but had magical powers, I look "white" and am something else entirely: someone who learned her lullabies in a different language, who knew a different, broken history heard from exiles, a girl who didn't celebrate Thanksgiving until she got engaged to an American American . . . a man whose "white" skin was nevertheless darker than hers.

I had to leave my rebellious young adulthood behind to realize how science fiction gave me the tools to deal with the quiet and insidious alienation that comes to those who pass. There was never a place I belonged. I wasn't dark enough in body to be welcome among minorities . . . but not white enough in mind to be at home among the people I resembled. Between these two homes, there was a chasm, and no way to cross it. It's no wonder the strangers in the strange lands of genre fiction were such a comfort. My heroes and I, we made a virtue of our alienation, and a fort of it. And if, unlike my heroes, I found that redoubt lonely . . . well. I could make stones of my silences, and did, and built the walls higher.

The science fiction and fantasy of my youth was a very black-and-white sort of genre. Like society, it didn't know what to do with someone in the middle, with one foot in one culture and one foot in another. It taught me the virtues of individuality, but not the virtues of community. It understood the alien and the human, but not the halfbreed. What I read growing up taught me how to survive, but not how to thrive.

Maybe that's why I had to write. Because it wasn't enough to identify the gaps in culture and rage at them, or despair. One has to learn how to live in the spaces between races and identities.

All my life, I've been searching for bridges and discovering, inevitably, that what you want, you must build. But as I look around my genre now, I see I'm not the only one tearing down the forts. Maybe by the time my daughter starts looking for tools in stories, she'll find ones that show her how to cope with her mixed-race heritage by connecting to others. Maybe I'll write those stories.

Maybe you will.

I'll bring my stones if you bring yours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daughter of two Cuban political exiles, M.C.A. Hogarth was born a foreigner in the American melting pot and has had a fascination for the gaps in cultures and the bridges that span them ever since. She is currently a full-time parent, artist, writer, and anthropologist to aliens, both human and otherwise, and is serving as the Vice President of SFWA.

An Army of Claudia Kishis

Sarah Kuhn | 600 words

I talk a lot about how important it is to see yourself centered in a story. As the protagonist, not the protagonist's best friend. As the superhero, not the sidekick. As the dragonslayer, not the guy/gal who gets the dragonslayer water, a hot towel, and a snack.

It took me a long time to realize that was something I could want, I could ask for, and that I could even write. Recently, I found myself excavating the science fiction/fantasy fandom of my childhood for examples that might have provided an initial spark, given me a little clue early on that Asian and/or Asian-American female protagonists could totally be a thing.

I thought of a lot of side characters that I imagined rich, staggeringly detailed expanded stories for (Jubilee, Demora Sulu, Strawberry Shortcake's flower-hat-wearing friend Almond Tea). I thought of characters I projected Asianness onto because I desperately wanted someone I was watching/reading about to be like me (Buttercup from the *Powerpuff Girls,* Lois Lane—she could be mixed, right?). I thought of characters I'd discovered in college who blew my mind wide open (the trio in *The Heroic Trio).* I loved them all, but none seemed to fit what I was suddenly on a quest for: a bona fide SF/F Asian lady protagonist I'd looked up to as a child.

Then I figured it out.

My beloved childhood protagonist wasn't part of SF/F—well, not exactly.

Her name was Claudia Kishi.

Claudia Kishi was the vice-president of Ann M. Martin's The Baby-Sitters Club, a series of books about a group of tween girls who are obsessed with high quality childcare. No, these books are not *technically* SF/F, but I'm going to make a case for the idea that to me, they sometimes read like they were. I mean, Claudia had her own phone line (one of my fantasies), a hollowed-out book where she hid candy (definitely one of my fantasies, though not even extending to the candy part, I just wanted a hollowed-out book *for so many reasons),* and the BSC was regularly hired en masse to go on elaborate family trips with their charges: on cruises and to Disney World and Sea City, an adorable beachside town with a restaurant called Crabs for Grabs (now we're getting into a fantasy I didn't even know I had—but in any case, all of these things seemed as fanciful and unattainable to me as my own pet dragon).

And Claudia was revolutionary in a way I didn't even comprehend at the time: Japanese-American, artistic, bad at school, temperamental, always dressed outrageously, and often reading a Nancy Drew mystery. She didn't just reject model minority stereotypes—she stomped them into the ground, usually with some kind of bedazzled high-top sneaker. Plus, she was definitely centered, in that she had entire books in the series named after her (and as early on as Book #2, *Claudia and the Phantom Phone Calls).*

Claudia was my protagonist spark, I realized, and it's characters like her that I want to bring into and see more of in SF/F. Imagine . . .

Space Captain Claudia Kishi

Dragonslayer Claudia Kishi

SuperClaudiaKishi

Pissed-Off Fairy Princess Claudia Kishi

Magical Girl Who Can Speak All the Animal Languages Claudia Kishi

Of course, these characters won't all be *exactly* like Claudia Kishi. But like her, they'll have that uniqueness, that multi-dimensional feeling, that refusal to be a stereotype.

And of course, they'll all be protagonists.

Just an army of Claudia Kishis, destroying science fiction.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Kuhn is the author of *Heroine Complex*—the first in a series starring Asian American superheroines—for DAW Books. She also wrote *The Ruby Equation* for the comics anthology *Fresh Romance* and the romantic comedy novella *One Con Glory,* which earned praise from io9 and *USA Today* and is in development as a feature film. Her writing has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine, Apex Magazine,* AngryAsianMan.com, IGN.com, *Back Stage, The Hollywood Reporter,* StarTrek.com, *Creative Screenwriting,* and the Hugo-nominated anthology *Chicks Dig Comics.* You can find her at heroinecomplex.com or on Twitter: @sarahkuhn.

The Biggest Tent of All

S.B. Divya | 670 words

I've been a fan of science fiction since the age of ten. For years, I was relatively isolated in my passion. Multiple factors played into that: My gender, immigrant culture, and being an only child all contributed. My favorite books and movies were experiences for me alone. I knew that fans must exist. *Star Wars, Dune, Lord of the Rings*—fame doesn't exist in a vacuum, but I had no idea how to connect with others who loved these strange and intricate worlds. One benefit of my isolation, however, was that no one said, "Science fiction isn't for you, for someone who doesn't look like the light-skinned, male authors of these stories."

When I joined Caltech as an undergraduate, I found my people at last. Nerd nirvana: I had arrived! Many of my classmates loved genre fiction as much as I did. They, too, had re-read the classics until the spines fell apart. They, too, had memorized every line of the movies. Where had they been all my life? Scattered around the USA and beyond, that's where. We didn't care where we came from or what we looked like. All that mattered was our shared passion.

Then came the internet. Starting with alt.fan.dune, moving on to the Tad Williams message board, and then to Boing Boing and io9, the world shrank. I discovered just how large this tribe was. The lovers of science fiction—the ones who had been ostracized and ridiculed by pop culture—were the foundation of the new technocracy. The geeks had inherited the Earth, and we rejoiced that we no longer had to be ashamed of living in imaginary worlds.

But the internet is a fickle place. Trolls lurk under the bridges it's built, and they recently vented some ugly thoughts about fandom.

For the first time in my experience, my sex and my brown skin meant—*to some people*—that I didn't belong in the world of science fiction.

For the first time in all my decades of loving this genre, I heard that women don't like hard science fiction; that non-white people shouldn't be main characters; that gays don't have a place in the wider universe.

Then I became an author, and I heard even worse: that the only reason to write characters who are Filipino or Ethiopian or Colombian is to satisfy some arbitrary liberal/politically correct standard of fiction. (It couldn't possibly be because these are people who make up daily life in a metropolitan US city.) I heard bitter rumors that editors were biased *toward* stories by authors who weren't white American men. That writers like me were ruining the genre by shoving our unrelatable characters down fans' throats. How could I parse these accusations?

Here's the rub: I don't experience science fiction through a lens colored by my physical appearance. I don't need characters to resemble me in order to appreciate their struggles.

The great beauty of genre fiction is in how it pushes the boundaries of what's possible, and that means getting into the minds of all kinds of life—elves, insects, robots, dragons, Wookiees. How anyone can say with a straight face that women, queers, and people of color don't have a place in these stories is mind-boggling.

Hari Seldon has an Indian first name. Hiro Protagonist is part-Japanese and part-African. Pyanfar Chanur is an intelligent leonine starship captain. Stilgar and his Fremen tribes are derived from desert Arabs. Ged is a dark-skinned wizard. Are any of these characters less readable or relatable because of their phenotypes?

Science fiction is where we break new ground. This is where we push the boundaries of what is possible, stretch our imaginations to their limits. This is not a genre that belongs to any one subset of human beings. Let's not forget our roots. Let's not forget that even today, certain elements of the world look askance at our favorite books and movies. We don't need petty in-fighting. Our tent is the multiverse, and it's big enough for everyone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.B. Divya is a lover of science, math, fiction, and the Oxford comma. When she isn't designing high-speed communications systems, raising her daughter, scratching the cats, or enjoying dinner with her husband, she writes. She also enjoys subverting expectations and breaking stereotypes whenever she can. In her past, she's used a telescope to find Orion's nebula, scuba dived with manta rays, and climbed to the top of a thousand-year-old stupa. She holds degrees in Computational Neuroscience and Signal Processing. Her stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction* and *Nature,* and her near-future science fiction novella, "Runtime," was just released by Tor.com Publications. You can read more about her at eff-words.com.

Recounting in Rainbow

Shveta Thakrar | 500 words

I want so many things. I want the folklore of all the world's traditions to be acknowledged and celebrated, not just those collected and edited by the Gebrüder Grimm. I want us to move beyond just Snow White and Cinderella, beyond elfin beings of gossamer wings and detachable sealskins to nature-loving yakshas and seductive apsaras. We have a global treasure trove of tales in a rainbow of colors; why recount only in red?

And why erase the rest of us?

Most of all, though, more than respectful representation, more than a righting of historical wrongs, more even than plain and simple accuracy, *I* want magic. *I* want adventure, too.

I started writing again as an adult because I looked around at the books I loved dearly —which fell either into the young adult category or speculative fiction genre or often both —and saw no one who looked like me. No one with brown skin who got to play with magic and learn spells. No one who engaged with creatures of coiling serpentine tails or backward hands and feet. No one who sneaked aboard spaceships and sailed toward the stars. Where were my mischievous nagas? Where were my creepy bhoots and vetalas? Where was my *Millennium Falcon?*

Where was *I?*

I've hungered for wonder and all things numinous ever since I was tiny, and so have gobbled up book after book, always searching for something more. As an adult, I realized the types of tales that compelled me most were those based in the mythic tradition, which draws on folklore and mythology and is its own kind of mythmaking *(myth* as "sacred story," not as "lie"). I plunged headfirst into the work of Holly Black and Emma Bull and the anthologies curated by Terri Windling, I returned to the Amar Chitra Katha comics of my childhood, I read all the *Star Wars* tie-in novels available to me, and I knew speculative fiction was where my voice belonged.

But trying to get other writers and editors to take that seriously hasn't been as easy as I'd hoped. How do I successfully retell a narrative when my target readership (the North American market) isn't familiar with the original? How do I avoid being told "your names are too hard"? How do I dismantle the bias-dripping assumption that "your brown protagonist doesn't have universal appeal"?

I can't answer these questions. I can only choose each day to string together words overflowing with the enchantment I continue to crave, words that are beginning to find their audience. I see other dream-travelers at the loom, too, whether queer Latinas or disabled Jamaican Canadians or second-generation Chinese Americans, and the space below my breastbone aches in anticipation of fresh, sparkling stories. Magic and adventure know no skin color, no external barrier. They know only richness of tapestry and tale, and there's no reason not to weave together as many brilliant and multifaceted

threads as we can.

I'll keep writing, and I hope you keep reading. I will be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shveta Thakrar is a writer of South Asian-flavored fantasy, social justice activist, and part-time nagini. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Interfictions Online, Clockwork Phoenix 5, Mythic Delirium, Uncanny, Faerie, Strange Horizons, Kaleidoscope: Diverse YA Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories,* and *Steam-Powered 2: More Lesbian Steampunk Stories.* When not spinning stories about spider silk and shadows, magic and marauders, and courageous girls illuminated by dancing rainbow flames, Shveta crafts, devours books, daydreams, draws, travels, bakes, and occasionally even practices her harp.

Penguins, Robins, and Science Fiction

Caroline M. Yoachim | 610 words

Writing this essay, I am a penguin trying to explain what it means to be a bird. People love to categorize, and it isn't always easy. When people hear "bird," they are more likely to think of a robin than a penguin. Some things are at the center of a category, and others are at the edges.

For the category "people of color," I am an edge case. I'm mixed race—my mom is Japanese and my dad is white. Racial identity has always been a struggle for me. As a person of color, I feel like a penguin among robins—awkward and different, lacking the shared experience of flight. But if I don't identify as a person of color, I feel like a penguin pretending not to be a bird at all.

When I was a kid, I tried to fit in, which at my mostly white elementary school meant hiding anything about me that was Japanese. I wouldn't tell people my middle name (Mariko), and I was always embarrassed when people came over to my house and I had to ask them to take off their shoes. In my teens, I read a lot of classic science fiction—Asimov, Clarke, etc.—and while I loved the ideas, I never saw myself in any of the characters. The protagonists were mostly white, and mostly male. I didn't realize that this was a problem, back then. I loved the stories anyway, for the adventure and the science and the sense of wonder.

The fiction from my childhood had a big influence on my writing. I'm still drawn to big ideas and alien worlds and sense of wonder, all of which is fine. But my childhood reading had a more insidious effect, too: if I don't pay attention, I default to writing white characters. In my early stories, the characters tended to be either white or unspecified (in which case readers will tend to assume that they are white). The idea that characters can't be like me was so deeply ingrained that I wasn't in the story *even when I was the one writing it.*

I'm glad to see people talking about diversity in fiction. Increased awareness is a good first step, one that will hopefully let us recognize our biases and take action against them. Once I realized what I was doing with my characters, I made an effort to represent a wider range of people in my fictional worlds. I worry that I will get everything wrong, because—to go back to my bird metaphor—I'm a penguin, so who am I to write about robins or nightingales? But I try, because reality is diverse, and everyone should get to see themselves in the fiction they read.

Thankfully, my voice isn't the only one out there. It has been exciting, as an adult, to finally find the perspectives that were missing from the books I read as a teen—in novels and stories by writers like N.K. Jemisin, Ken Liu, Nnedi Okorafor, and Nalo Hopkinson.

Science fiction is a chorus, and we need a wider range of voices. As a penguin, I want to hear the songs of robins and sparrows, toucans and flamingoes. I want to learn what it is like to fly, even if I will never have that experience myself. Perhaps others would like

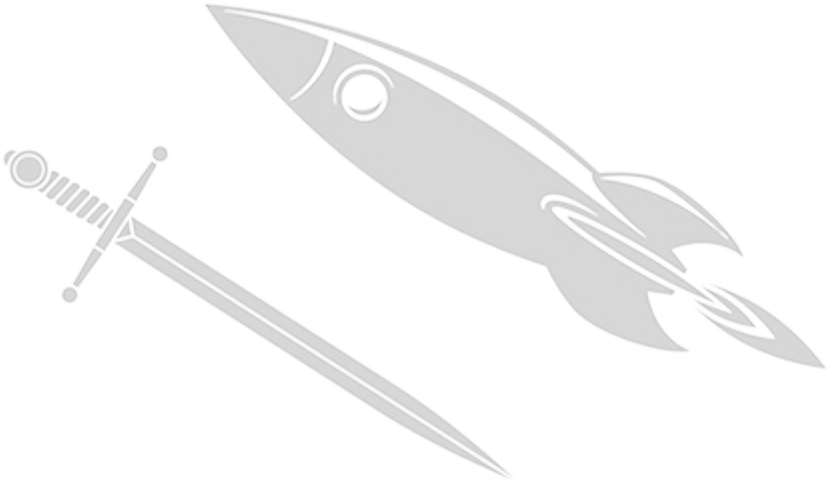
to know how it feels to waddle on the ice or dive beneath the waves, as penguins do. We each have a unique perspective we can share, and we need to make our voices heard.

So to all my fellow birds out there: I hope you'll sing with me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline M. Yoachim lives in Seattle and loves cold, cloudy weather. She is the author of dozens of short stories, appearing in *Fantasy & Science Fiction, Clarkesworld, Asimov's,* and *Daily Science Fiction,* among other places. Her debut short story collection, *Seven Wonders of a Once and Future World & Other Stories,* is coming out with Fairwood Press in 2016. For more about Caroline, check out her website at carolineyoachim.com.

MISCELLANY



Coming Attractions
The Editors

Coming up in July, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Ted Kosmatka (“She the Unnamed”) and Jilly Dreadful (“5x5”), along with SF reprints by Genevieve Valentine (“Small Medicine”) and Seth Fried (“Hello Again”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by Rochita Loenen-Ruiz (“Magnifica Angelica Superable”) and Kenneth Schneyer (“Some Pebbles in the Palm”), and fantasy reprints by A. Merc Rustad (“Finding Home”) and Spencer Ellsworth (“The Child Support of Cromdor the Condemned”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns.

For our ebook readers, we also have an ebook-exclusive reprint of Walter Jon Williams’s novella “Surfacing” and a novel excerpt.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out.

Later this year, in October, be sure to also keep an eye out for *Nightmare’s* People of Colo(u)r Destroy Horror! (guest-edited by Silvia Moreno-Garcia) and, in December, *Fantasy’s* People of Colo(u)r Destroy Fantasy! (guest-edited by Daniel José Older). To learn more about those, or anything Destroy-related, visit www.destroysf.com.

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About the Special Issue Staff
The Editors

Nalo Hopkinson, Guest Co-Editor-in-Chief & Original Fiction Editor

Nalo Hopkinson is a Jamaican-born Canadian whose taproots extend to Trinidad and Guyana. She has published numerous novels and short stories, and has edited and co-edited anthologies, including *Whispers From the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction,* and *Mojo: Conjure Stories*. Her writing has received the John W. Campbell Memorial Award, the Locus Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Sunburst Award for Excellence in Canadian Literature of the Fantastic, and the Andre Norton Award. Hopkinson is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. She has taught at both the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop and the Clarion West Writers Workshop. Hopkinson's short story collection *Falling in Love With Hominids* was published in 2015 by Tachyon Books. Learn more at nalohopkinson.com.

Kristine Ong Muslim, Guest Co-Editor-in-Chief & Original Fiction Editor

Kristine Ong Muslim is the author of *We Bury the Landscape* (Queen's Ferry Press, 2012), *Grim Series* (Popcorn Press, 2012), and *A Roomful of Machines* (ELJ Publications, 2015). Her forthcoming books include the short story collection *Age of Blight* (Unnamed Press, 2016) and two poetry collections from university presses in the Philippines. Her stories appeared in *One Buck Horror, Confrontation Magazine, The State,* and elsewhere. She lives in southern Philippines and serves as poetry editor of *LONTAR: The Journal of Southeast Asian Speculative Fiction,* a literary journal published by Epigram Books in Singapore. Learn more at kristinemuslim.weebly.com.

Nisi Shawl, Reprint Editor

Nisi Shawl is a founder of the Carl Brandon Society and a member of Clarion West's Board of Directors. Since its 2011 inception she has edited reviews for feminist literary quarterly *The Cascadia Subduction Zone.* Books Shawl has edited include *Bloodchildren: Stories by the Octavia E. Butler Scholars;* and *WisCon Chronicles 5: Writing and Racial Identity;* she also co-edited *Strange Matings: Science Fiction, Feminism, African American Voices,* and *Octavia E. Butler;* and *Stories for Chip: A Tribute to Samuel R. Delany.* With Cynthia Ward she coauthored 2005 Tiptree Longlist book *Writing the Other: A Practical Approach.* Her story collection *Filter House* co-won the 2009 Tiptree Award. Shawl's Belgian Congo steampunk novel *Everfair* is due out from Tor in September 2016.

Berit Ellingsen, Flash Fiction Editor

Berit Ellingsen's novel *Not Dark Yet* was published by Two Dollar Radio in November 2015. Berit is the author of the short story collection *Beneath the Liquid Skin* (firthFORTH Books) and the novel *Une Ville Vide* (PublieMonde), with work in W.W. Norton's *Flash Fiction International, SmokeLong Quarterly, Unstuck, The Humanity of Monsters,* and other places. Berit's stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and the British Science Fiction Association Award. The author divides time between Norway and Svalbard in the Arctic, and is a member of the Norwegian Authors' Union. Learn more at beritellingsen.com.

Grace L. Dillon, Nonfiction Editor

Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) is a Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program, School of Gender, Race, and Nations, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, Indigenous Futurisms, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012) and *Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest* (Oregon State University Press, 2003). Her work appears in diverse journals including *The Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television; Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction; Extrapolation; The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts; The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television; Science Fiction Studies; Parabola;* and *Renaissance Papers.*

Vikas Adam, Podcast Producer

Vikas Adam is a classically trained actor with numerous credits in stage, film, commercials, and television, in addition to his over one hundred recorded audiobooks. He's quickly established himself as one who creates versatile, distinct, and clear voices for characters he embodies. Equally at home with a light piece of literature or a dark thriller, a short story or an epic novel (his longest—forty-nine hours!), Vikas's audiobooks have garnered numerous awards and nominations, including Earphones, various best-of-the-year lists, and the Audie Award. When not recording, acting, or directing, he's a lecturer in the Theater Department at UCLA.

Rajan Khanna, Podcast Host

Rajan Khanna is an author, blogger, reviewer and narrator. His first novel, *Falling Sky,* a post-apocalyptic adventure with airships, was released in 2014 followed by a sequel, *Rising Tide,* in 2015. His short fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed Magazine, Beneath Ceaseless Skies,* and several anthologies. His articles and reviews have appeared at

Tor.com and LitReactor.com and his podcast narrations can be heard at *PodCastle, Escape Pod, PseudoPod, Beneath Ceaseless Skies,* and *Lightspeed Magazine.* Rajan lives in Brooklyn where he's a member of the Altered Fluid writing group. His personal website is rajankhanna.com and he tweets, @rajanyk.

Sunil Patel, Personal Essays Editor

Sunil Patel is a Bay Area fiction writer and playwright who has written about everything from ghostly cows to talking beer. His plays have been performed at San Francisco Theater Pub and San Francisco Olympians Festival, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fireside Magazine, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, Flash Fiction Online, The Book Smugglers, Fantastic Stories of the Imagination,* and *Asimov's Science Fiction,* among others. Plus he reviews books for *Lightspeed* and is Assistant Editor of *Mothership Zeta.* His favorite things to consume include nachos, milkshakes, and narrative. Find out more at ghostwritingcow.com, where you can watch his plays, or follow him @ghostwritingcow. His Twitter has been described as "engaging," "exclamatory," and "crispy, crunchy, peanut buttery."

Arley Sorg, Spotlights Editor & Special Issue Coordinator

Arley Sorg grew up in England, Hawaii, and Colorado. He studied Asian Religions at Pitzer College. He lives in Oakland, and usually writes in local coffee shops. A 2014 Odyssey Writing Workshop graduate, he is an assistant editor at *Locus Magazine.* He's soldering together a novel, has thrown a few short stories into orbit, and hopes to launch more.

Nicasio Andres Reed, Spotlight Interviewer

Nicasio Andres Reed is a queer Filipino-American writer and a member of the Queer Asian SF/F/H Illuminati. They write fiction, comics, and poetry, and their work has been represented in *Beyond: A Queer Sci-Fi Comics Anthology, Strange Horizons, Lightspeed's* Queers Destroy Science Fiction!, *Liminality* and more. Their next short story is upcoming in *Shimmer.* You can find them on Twitter @NicasioSilang, probably tweeting about *Dragon Age* again.

Pablo Miguel Alberto Vazquez, Spotlight Interviewer

Pablo Miguel Alberto Vazquez considers himself many things, including performer, poet, wild fanboy, sometimes scholar/always student, agitator, bard-magus, and whatever else he comes up with. A true lover of Freedom and Passion, he champions love and unity, liberty and danger, creativity and aesthetics. He's a cinephile, DC Comics enthusiast, voracious reader, and avid gamer (tabletop/video). Born alongside the Panama Canal, he

strangely does not like extreme heat and views his perfect weather to be something akin to Fimbulwinter, but he definitely is a child of the Caribbean, with all of its mystic glory, tropical paradises and delicious culinary trappings. Pablo spends his time traversing various underground and subcultural communities, ranging from magical lodges and mystic circles, unsanctioned parties and kink events to Underground Rap and radical bookstores to, of course, Science Fiction and Fantasy fandom. He also prefers Social Justice Wizard, thank you very much.

Tara Sim, Spotlight Interviewer

Tara Sim is the author of *Timekeeper* (Sky Pony Press, Nov. 1, 2016) and can typically be found wandering the wilds of the Bay Area, California. When she's not chasing cats or lurking in bookstores, she writes books about magic, clocks, and explosives. Half-Indian and full geek, she eats too many samosas and awkwardly dances to Bhangra music. Follow her on Twitter at @EachStarAWorld, or check out her website at tarasim.com.

Tyhitia Green, Spotlight Interviewer

Tyhitia Green is an author who pens horror, fantasy, and science fiction. She dabbles in other genres as well, whenever the mood strikes her. Her work has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue* and on BlackGirlNerds.com. She is hard at work on revising the first novel in her dark urban fantasy series. She is also working on several short stories. You can find her on her blog (obfuscationofreality.blogspot.com) or at Goodreads (bit.ly/1T8lfaW).

Cassandra Khaw, Spotlight Interviewer

Cassandra Khaw (cassandrakhaw.com) is the business developer for Ysbryd Games, and also an occasional contributor for Ars Technica UK and Eurogamer. When not otherwise working, she's either punching things or writing fiction. Her work can be found or is forthcoming at *Clarkesworld* and *Daily Science Fiction.*

JY Yang, Spotlight Interviewer

JY Yang is a lapsed scientist, a former journalist, and a short story writer. She lives in Singapore, in a bubble populated by her imagination and an indeterminate number of succulent plants named Lars. A graduate of the 2013 class of Clarion West, her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clarkesworld, Strange Horizons,* and *Apex,* among others. A list of her publications can be found at misshallelujah.net, and she can be found on Twitter as @halleluyang, grumbling about Scandinavian languages and making displeased noises about the state of the world.

Christian Coleman, Spotlight Interviewer

Christian A. Coleman is a 2013 graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. He lives and writes in the Boston area. He tweets at @coleman_II.

Isabel Yap, Spotlight Interviewer

Isabel Yap writes fiction and poetry, works in the tech industry, and drinks tea. Born and raised in Manila, she has also lived in California, Tokyo (for ninety-six days!), and London. In 2013, she attended the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has been published by *Book Smugglers Publishing, Uncanny Magazine, Tor.com, Shimmer, Interfictions,* and *Nightmare.* You can find her on her website (isalikeswords.wordpress.com) or on Twitter at @visyap.

Henry Lien, Art Director

Henry Lien is an art dealer and proprietor of The Glass Garage Gallery in Los Angeles. He represents artists from North America, South America, Europe, and Asia. His artists have appeared in *ARTnews, Art in America, Juxtapoz, The Huffington Post,* and *Time Magazine,* and have been collected by and exhibited in institutions and museums around the world. Henry has also served as the President of the West Hollywood Fine Art Dealers' Association and a Board Member of the West Hollywood Avenues of Art and Design. Henry also has extensive experience as an attorney and teaches at UCLA Extension. In addition, Henry is a speculative fiction writer. He is a Clarion West 2012 graduate, has sold his work to *Asimov's, Analog, Fantasy & Science Fiction, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet,* and *Interfictions,* and has been nominated for a Nebula. He is originally from Taiwan. Visit his author website at henrylien.com.

Christopher Park, Cover Artist

Christopher Park is a multi-media, interactive illustrator whose clients include SixPenny Magazine, Popshot, Pro Publica and Mackin Educational Resources. While classically trained in traditional illustration, his combined knowledge of art and front-end code have breathed life and movement into his work and allowed it to become unique, interactive and dynamic. See more of Christopher's interactive illustration and design at plantmonsterstudios.com and follow him on Twitter @plantMNster.

Melanie Ujimori, Featured Illustrator

Melanie Ujimori is an illustrator and graphic designer transplanted from Hawaii, currently living in Portland, OR. When not hiding from sunshine and rain, she likes drawing rabbits and robots, or a combination of both. Find her portfolio at

merumori.com.

Alan Bao, Illustrator

Alan Bao is a Shanghai-born illustrator residing in Canada. He plays a pretty mean blues guitar, and finds it unbearably awkward to write about himself in the third-person.

Odera Igbokwe, Illustrator

Odera Igbokwe is a graduate of Rhode Island School of Design, where they earned their BFA in Illustration. At Brown University, Odera studied movement-theater and west African dance with New Works/World Traditions. As an illustrator, Odera loves to explore storytelling through character archetypes, afro-diasporic mythologies, and magical girl transformation sequences. To learn more visit www.odera.net.

Sonia Liao, Illustrator

Sonia Liao is an illustrator and comic artist from the greater Boston area. She has produced work for EMET Comics, Sourcebooks Fire and ComicFlix. Notable titles include the Helena Rose comic series by E. O. Levendorf, the young adult book *You Were Here* by Cori McCarthy, and the movie-to-comic adaptations of the Zorro series produced by ComicFlix. In her free time, she's a TV and comics enthusiast who loves contributing to fanzines. Her favorite things in the world are alpaca plushies, coffee and fresh mangoes. Her professional work can be found on her website, sonialiao.com. She graduated with her BFA in Illustration from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2014.

Pugletto, Illustrator

A. Pug, more affectionately known as “Pugletto,” is a freelance artist and animator whose diversity project, “Disney Animals as Humans,” gained traction back in June of 2015. Prior to this, Pug has written a short four-page comic for Womanthology's “Heroic,” and has since graduated with a BA in Animation with a focus in character and prop design. More art available at pugletz.deviantart.com.

Tanna Tucker, Illustrator

Tanna Tucker’s work combines interests in folklore, African diaspora and representation in speculative art and fiction. In terms of genres, her interests are varied, but the common thread is a desire to depict full and complex characters that were absent in the stories she read growing up. Her current work investigates the roles of African Americans in the narrative and recorded history of the American West and seeks to reveal those hidden accounts. Tanna will be featured in the upcoming GWAN Anthology. Her work has shown

at the San Francisco Cartoon Art Museum, Mission Comics & Art, and Light Grey Art Lab. You can find her work online at tannatucker.com and ladyhawk9000.tumblr.com.

Victoria Ying, Illustrator

Victoria Ying (victoriaying.com) grew up in Southern California with the sun and surf. She started her career in the arts by falling in love with comic books; this eventually turned into a career working in Animation. She loves Japanese curry, putting things in her shopping cart online and taking them out again, and hanging out with her one-eared cat. Her film credits include *Tangled, Wreck-It Ralph, Frozen, Paperman, Big Hero 6,* and *Moana.*

Additional Special Issue Staff
The Editors

We made every effort to involve POC production staff whenever possible, but, as with the Women and Queers Destroy projects, we involved some allies on the production side of things. (Note: Copy Editing, though it has "Editing" right in the name, is actually a production job. Similarly, Audio Editing is a production task as well.) So the following folks worked on this special issue, but are not necessarily people of color.

Publisher

John Joseph Adams

Associate Publisher

Christie Yant

Managing Editor

Wendy N. Wagner

Audio Editors

Jim Freund
Jack Kincaid

Copy Editor

Dana Watson

Proofreaders

Anthony R. Cardno
Megan Chaudhuri
Liz Colter
Spencer Ellsworth
Mike Glyde
Coral Moore
Julie Steinbacher
Devin Marcus

Book Production & Layout

Matthew Bright

Crowdfunding Logo Design

Julia Sevin

LIGHTSPEED Reader Survey

The Editors

From June 1 – July 31, we'll be conducting a new reader survey, to learn a bit more about our readers. Doing this periodically helps us present accurate (but anonymous) information about our readership to our potential advertising partners, which in turn helps support the magazine. It also allows us to see what kind of readers our readers are, which in turn helps us fine-tune things so that *Lightspeed* can be as good as it can be.

So, if you would please take the time to complete our Reader Survey, we would greatly appreciate it.

To demonstrate our thanks for filling it out, we're going to give a free lifetime ebook subscription to *Lightspeed* to one randomly select one lucky survey respondent!

Visit lightspeedmagazine.com/2016-reader-survey to complete the survey. Thank you!


LIGHTSPEED
PEOPLE OF COLO(U)R DESTROY SCIENCE FICTION! SPECIAL ISSUE
ISSUE 73 • JUNE 2016
GUEST EDITED BY NALO HOPKINSON AND KRISTINE ONG MUSLIM